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The World According to Marcus Aurelius:
Stoicism in the Novels of John Irving

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Abstract

The novels of John Irving have never been studied as a whole. Since 1968, Irving has written and published seven novels, yet critics have only examined them individually. As a result, they have never discovered a coherent thematic pattern linking Irving's body of work.

The central focus of those critics who have dealt with Irving's novels has been the examination of minor image patterns and obvious symbolism. Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson, for example, in the most recent and comprehensive critical work to date, carefully examine each of Irving's novels - separately - offering some suggestions about his style, strengths and weaknesses. They do not, however, include any speculations or theories concerning Irving's overall vision, and thereby fail to identify the unifying force which connects all of his novels.

Much of the other criticism of Irving's fiction is comprised of short, narrowly-focused articles that tend to explore merely one or two aspects of a single novel. The majority of Dissertations likewise seem to adopt an unusually small and limited focus.

In 1989, Irving published his latest novel, *A Prayer for Own Meany*. This novel, like the ones which precede it, is built upon a foundation of strong, vibrantly colourful characters who struggle to fulfill their dreams in a world filled with pain, misfortune, and random violence: a world in which nothing seems constant or within their spheres of control. All of Irving's characters are shaped by the uncertainty of their lives, by the vague, external force - or fate - which clearly manipulates the choices they make and the directions in which they move. This force, and the human struggle to acknowledge and then to deal with its presence, is the unifying element of all of Irving's novels.

The focus of my thesis is the nature of this "force" - which manifests itself first as fate and finally, in *Owen Meany*, as God - and the way it shapes the stoic attitudes of all of Irving's characters. Such an exploration will provide a previously unseen, unifying view of John Irving's fiction.

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Contents

Introduction

The novels of John Irving all deal with the turbulent lives of characters who must recognize and accept that they do not and cannot control their own destinies. Although Irving's characters differ greatly from novel to novel, as do the circumstances in which they live, they must all eventually deal with this fact or continue empty lives. In accepting this lack of control, Irving's characters evolve towards an understanding of the force which does control their lives, while trying to develop a way to deal with its presence without becoming apathetic, helpless victims.

This force, which exists in all of Irving's seven novels, provides an essential link between these works. Yet, as the bulk of the published scholarship which examines the writing of John Irving has been book reviews and brief articles dealing with individual novels, this link has not been given a proper examination. In fact, with only two book length studies published to date, not much has been written concerning Irving's canon of work. The first of these critical books, written by Gabriel Miller after the publication of *The Hotel New Hampshire*, examines each of the novels independently and does not explore the link this force provides. The second book, written before the publication of *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson, also explores the novels separately.

Irving's novels have sold more copies than almost any other "serious" writer of his generation. As a result of his popularity, and his repeated use of violent subjects such as murder, rape, adultery and abortion, a number of critics have discounted his work after only rudimentary study. Often, these violent elements are seen by critics as gratuitous and sensationalistic in Irving's novels. And, in discounting Irving on this basis they have overlooked the intrinsic value of Irving's work, and the manner in which he deals with his chosen subjects; Irving integrates these violent and intrusive elements of North American culture into his writing without becoming overly sentimental or moralistic.

However, some of the critics who explore Irving's novels recognize many of the strengths in these works. In their 1989 study, Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson describe Irving's use of "pop" subject matter, stating,

> In exploring these areas--marriage, murder, love, rape, terrorism, abortion--he authenticates them while transcending the limits of their treatment by those writers who would exploit them for easy commercial success."[1]

Irving treats these areas with neither shock nor moral outrage. He recognizes that they are a very real part of western society, a part he portrays without letting it become the focus of his work. In all of his novels, Irving creates places which are both menacing and comforting, where violence exists but does not dominate.

The worlds John Irving creates in his novels are constantly changing. These worlds, full of both violence and happiness, shape the characters who live in them. Irving's characters must deal with a world which may appear random and uncontrollable to them. In analyzing Irving's world, Nancy Walker claims that

> Irving does not posit a violent and arbitrary world, but rather one in which violence and havoc are present in sufficient quantities to demand constant vigilance... Violence is given the same matter-of-fact approach as other extremes in Irving's fiction.[2]

Irving's world is not one in which violence is random and without reason. It is a world where violence has the potential to trigger growth, to teach and to create positive change. As Walker suggests, violence is not the only "extreme" which exists in Irving's fiction. Irving's fiction is filled with characters who must be vigilant so that they can deal with all the changes in their lives while at the same time question where their lives are headed and why.

Despite the attention given to the violence and other extremes in Irving's fiction, these elements are only important in how they shape and

change the characters of his novels. In fact, "virtually every Irving novel...builds its narrative frame around the actual or attempted spiritual and intellectual growth of the major character[s]."[3] This growth always comes as a result of the characters striving to comprehend the events in their lives over which they have no control. In fact, for those characters who fail to achieve a satisfactory level of spiritual or intellectual growth, it is their inability to come to terms with the extremes in their lives which arrests their development.

In his analysis of the structure in Irving's novels, Michael Priestly states that "the characters, in their own realm, search independently for their own order."[4] This desire for order, or for a relief from chaos, ultimately leads them to search for a unifying and methodical reason behind the seemingly inexplicable events in their lives. And it is this search which shapes the lives of Irving's characters and ultimately reveals the meaning in his novels.

This search for order and meaning in Irving's novels leads some of the characters to believe in something greater than themselves, something universal which connects all of their lives. This approach to life, which links all of Irving's novels and has not been identified by critics, shapes the development of his characters. Irving, in all of his novels, advocates the virtues and necessity of a Stoic approach to life; of enduring all hardship and adversity with fortitude.

However, this approach to life does not encompass all aspects of the Stoics' philosophy. Irving's characters must embrace a way of living which is based on several major principles of Stoicism, but which also acknowledges the need for a certain toughness in facing life. In Irving's novels, this is more of an attitude than a philosophical idea. Through the lives of his characters, Irving advocates this kind of Stoic attitude as the necessary way to find happiness and fulfillment in life.

Although Irving does not explore all of the complexities of this approach to life, he does adhere to some of the fundamental principals of Stoicism. C. R. Haines, in an introduction to *The Communings with*

Himself of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, describes "the keynote of Stoicism" as "*Life according to Nature*... By 'Nature' was meant the controlling Reason of the Universe."[5] This force controls everything that happens in the universe, from the smallest details to the larger issues of life and death. The force which exists in each of Irving's novels can be identified as a manifestation of this controlling power. Everything that happens because of this force has a purpose and meaning, which may be incomprehensible to any or all individuals but nevertheless exists in all parts of life.

Anyone who follows the basic tenants of Stoicism must realize that "insecurity and unhappiness were the result of pursuing what was not wholly under the control of the individual."[6] By focusing on making decisions which are under an individual's control, and not on trying to control the results of those decisions, which are not controllable, one can find happiness and fulfilment. According to the Stoics, this focus will lead to a greater understanding of one's self and of one's place in the universe.

This focus also mandates that one recognize and accept the force which does control the universe. Marcus Aurelius described the role of this force, stating

> the Universal Substance is docile and ductile; and the Reason that controls it has no motive in itself to do wrong. For it hath no wrongness and doeth no wrong, nor is anything harmed by it. But all things come into being and fulfil their purpose as it directs.[7]

The force which is evident in Irving's novels, which controls and shapes the lives of his characters is similar to this Stoic idea. Although the manifestations of this force, which I will call Fate, change somewhat and become stronger and more evident through Irving's novels, it is this force which unites all of his writing.

Most of the characters in Irving's novels are strange and eccentric, such as the transvestite quarterback in *The World According to Garp*[8] or the celibate abortionist in *The Cider House Rules*.[9] However, it is not this aspect that links his works. It is rather Fate, the force which directs and molds the lives and personalities of these characters, which provides a

unifying link from his earliest novel to his last. This force, which first manifests itself as a vague and elusive unseen power, and later evolves into God, determines the growth of each character and his consequent ability or inability to achieve happiness and personal fulfilment. All of Irving's major characters must struggle to recognize and to accept this force in their lives and to go on not in spite of it, but because of it. This enigmatic force evolves, becoming more powerful and evident, with each succeeding novel, culminating in Irving's most recent novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*[10], in which it becomes God.

Irving's first three novels are often grouped together as a single work by critics and by Irving himself in various interviews because although they received some critical acclaim, they were financially unsuccessful. None of these works displays the unity and focus Irving would achieve with *The World According to Garp*. Even so, each one features characters whose acceptance of the uncontrollable elements in their lives reveals the genesis of Irving's elusive force, Fate. Consequently, these novels comprise a vital part of Irving's canon. In these works, Fate is the force which directs and controls the characters' lives, even though it is not clearly delineated or defined in the minds of the characters. It is simply "the supposed power that predetermines events."[11] Those characters who are able to accept the presence of this force and still find happiness are able to survive in their worlds. These first novels, *Setting Free the Bears*,[12] *The Water-Method Man*[13] and *The 158-Pound Marriage*[14] depict Irving's early "moral vision which reaffirms human dignity and establishes human significance in a chaotic and violent universe."[15] Irving's vision and message is clear: only by accepting the force which shapes this universe can the people who exist in it continue to grow and hope to achieve contentment.

In Irving's fourth novel, *The World According to Garp*, the force which controls the lives of the characters becomes more clearly defined, as do the characters who interact with it. The characters in *Garp* must contend with a Fate which is more fully developed, more concrete, and which

affects all aspects of their lives. They recognize its inescapable presence in their lives and they even give it a name: "the undertoad." To most of the characters in *Garp*, "the undertoad" is something to be feared. It is the unknown, and it brings change which is often violent, and always inescapable. And it is only through an acceptance of this force that these characters can learn and grow. They must not become complacent, but rather accept both the good and the bad that Fate brings into their lives.

The Hotel New Hampshire,[16] Irving's fifth novel, focuses on the Berry family and how they deal with their uncontrollable and chaotic lives. Fate, for them, is symbolized by Sorrow, the dog they put to sleep, have stuffed, and whose occasional appearance in this ornamental state serves as an omen to them of inevitable change and upheaval. The Berrys learn to accept all the violent events which fall upon them, such as the deaths of three members of their family. All of them learn, individually and at varying rates, an acceptance of fate and the fact that they have no control over their lives. The changes which Fate forces them to deal with are more extreme than in Irving's previous novels and the characters' acceptance of this force is not as quick in coming.

Fate, and the way it affects the lives of his characters, changes again in *The Cider House Rules*, Irving's next novel. In this work, Irving's ideas about this force become more complex and the effect it has on the lives of the characters is compounded. An acceptance of Fate is no longer enough; the characters must also understand that the choices they make will ultimately decide which destiny they fulfil. They must attempt to understand the link between the choices they make and the way those choices will affect their lives.

The reasons for the characters to accept fate also change in *Cider House*. The characters in this novel must not only search for a destiny which will bring them happiness, but must also find the "right" way of living. The *Cider House* characters must try to find the path to fulfilment through "useful" or utilitarian pursuits. The central protagonist, Homer Wells, temporarily finds happiness and love, but it is based on lies and deception

and he must eventually give his happiness up in search for a more useful, honest destiny. Homer must realize what the Stoics believed about life, that

> the door is open. Do not be more fearful than children; but as they, when the play doth not please them, say, "I will play no longer": so do you, in the same case, say, "I will play no longer," and go; but, if you stay, do not complain."[17]

Homer's final recognition of the one true course for his life, directed by virtue and not selfishness, foreshadows the choices of the characters in Irving's final work to date, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

In this, Irving's seventh novel, Fate evolves into more than a loosely defined, controlling presence and ultimately manifests itself as God. *Owen Meany* centres around the life of a strange and very small man whose faith in God's plan and in his own destiny never waivers. Owen Meany not only believes that God has a plan for him, but repeatedly states that

> God has allowed me to know more than most people know...I know that I am God's instrument; I have faith that God will let me know what I'm supposed to do, and when I'm supposed to do it. (*Prayer*, 326)

Owen's faith forces those around him to question their beliefs and their own decisions. He chooses to accept God's plan for himself and plans his life around the fulfilment of that plan. Owen believes that the governing, indeed divine, principle in man is his moral will; hence his sole active duty is to exercise it rightly, and by recognizing the rule of divine providence in the universe of which he is an integral part, to accept God's will.[18]

As a result of his clarity of vision and his willing acceptance of this governing power, which he believes is God, Owen Meany emerges as the most complete and self-fulfilled of all of Irving's characters, and consequently as an influential example of how to live correctly to all those around him.

The novels of John Irving deal unapologetically with the most prevalent, and quite often most violent, elements which pervade contemporary

Western society: rape, murder, abortion, love. Irving does not exploit these subjects for commercial success, or merely shrug them off as random, unexplained occurrences in a decaying world; he shows that all the violence, all the chaos, evolves naturally from a "force" which constantly influences his characters' lives. This "force" is present in all his novels. It evolves from a vague and undefined power in his early novels, into the named entity "Sorrow" in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and finally, in his last novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, into God. The characters in these novels must all deal, directly and indirectly, with this force and the way it manipulates their lives. And it is only through their struggle to understand and accept its presence that they are able to grow as individuals and achieve happiness and personal fulfilment. It is this struggle which is the focus of this thesis, and which will be illuminated through an examination of the lives of Irving's main characters.

Chapter 2

All of Irving's novels are centred around and grow out of strong yet quirky characters such as Hannes Graff in *Setting Free the Bears*, Bogus Trumper of *The Water-Method Man* or the narrator of *The 158-Pound Marriage*. These characters, in turn, develop and grow out of the challenges which Fate gives them and how they deal with it. Each of Irving's early novels contains at least one character whose attitude towards this force and his or her place in the predestined scheme embodies Irving's ideas about how to live correctly and successfully by accepting his or her fate and then dealing with the negative and utilizing the positive. An examination of these early characters will reveal the genesis of Irving's ideas about the strength of the role Fate plays in shaping and controlling our lives and about how to effectively deal with it.

In his fourth novel, *The World According to Garp*, John Irving finally successfully united all of the elements of his talented storytelling, distinguished by his always quirky, yet believable characters. Some critics misjudged Irving's new and refined style, perhaps because his writing became more focused on essentially admirable characters and thus became less cynical and brooding. In her article, "John Irving's Aesthetics of Accessibility: Setting Free the Novel," Jane Bowers Hill states that,

> Irving's transition from the man who wrote *Setting Free the Bears*, *The Water-Method Man*, and *The 158-Pound Marriage* to the man who wrote *Garp* is an extraordinary example of a writer consciously deciding to move from high art to low, or as [Leslie] Fiedler perhaps more accurately labels the split, from minority writer to majority writer.[19]

Both Hill and Fiedler fail to realize that Irving's sudden popularity and seeming switch to "majority writer" came more from a change in publishers than it did from a real change in writing styles. Dissatisfied with the treatment his work received at Random House, who Irving states was "holding a track record on me: Irving's a writer's writer, he's gonna get

patted on the head by the literati, and he's gonna sell six or 7000 copies."[20] While working on *The World According to Garp*, Irving switched to Dutton, with Henry Robbins as his editor. First Dutton and, later, Pocket Books, decided to actively market this new novel, using "a story in *Newsweek*, and an outraged editorial from *CBS News*," plus "six different covers; an avalanche of print ads; radio spots; bus and subway ads; posters; headbands and wristbands (to bring out the wrestling motif); and hats."[21] This strategy, not a radical change in writing style, nor a move to "low art," was responsible for Irving's newfound and somewhat sudden popularity. Although it is true that Irving's style matured in *Garp*, and finally fulfilled the potential evident in his first three novels, all of his novels must be examined to fully understand his ideas about man's place in the universe and the correct way to live.

John Irving's first three novels, *Setting Free The Bears*, *The Water-Method Man*, and *The 158-Pound Marriage*, generally have been viewed as experimental and academic. In these novels, he experiments with various narrative structures and time frames, such as alternating between past, present and future. Irving also uses changing narrative perspectives, such as shifting first-person narration. Many critics separate these early works from his later, more commercial successes like *The World According to Garp*. By not thoroughly studying the patterns which begin in these early works and become more fully realized with each succeeding novel, they fail to recognize the continuity which runs through all his novels. All of Irving's novels are dominated by strong, yet bizarre, characters who are ruled by an unrelenting and undiscriminating force, which, in the early novels, more closely resembles fate than any kind of God. These early novels differ from the later ones in that they are not as unified in voice and thus are somewhat more chaotic and not as successful in conveying Irving's ideas. Yet, even here, the presence of Fate, which, throughout Irving's novels, will become more focused, stronger and will eventually transform into a god figure, is evident as the force which controls his characters. However, for the purpose of clarity, and because they are most

often seen as part of Irving's somewhat prevenient stage and have even been released in one volume, entitled *Three by Irving*, I will examine them together.

Anyone reading John Irving's first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, could conceivably conclude that the author believes that no one can escape the past and that the future shapes who we are, regardless of our own desires. Many critics feel, somewhat correctly, that it is the most uncontrolled and unpolished of his seven novels. Written as Irving's Masters thesis at the University of Iowa and published in 1968, *Setting Free the Bears* certainly lacks the control of his later works. However, the power of Fate and a preordained universe which molds all of his later works shaped even his earliest fiction. Carol Harter and James R. Thompson examine many of Irving's strengths, but they essentially look at each novel separately and do not search for overall patterns. They feel that, in *Setting Free the Bears*,

> that world is the uncertain prototype of the world according to Irving, a place where, as Marilyn French says, we are constantly aware of "the terrifying contingency of human life" and in which "the great equalizer is death and its harbinger, accident."[22]

Harter and Thompson recognize that Irving's world in *Setting Free the Bears* is full of violence and death and that no character can ultimately escape these forces. However, violence and death, in themselves, are not only great equalizers, but, more importantly, are one-half of what Irving feels constitutes life. These darker parts of life are simply signs of the overriding and controlling universal design which cannot be escaped. First Siggy Javotnik and later Hannes Graff experience both the good and the disastrous which has been destined for them. Neither can escape their "pre-history"(*SFB*, 106), their present, nor their future.

Gabriel Miller, in his 1982 full length study of Irving and his works, also recognizes the violence in Irving's work, yet does not see past that violence to the statement Irving is making about people and their development, which is controlled and directed by Fate. However, Miller does not devote as much study to Irving's writing as a whole, as he does to

Irving's repeated use of certain character types and plot devices which could account for this oversight. Irving is trying to illustrate that people become who they are because of what happens to them and how they deal with their own helplessness. Miller does not seem to see what Siggy himself sees and confirms by writing his own "pre-history." Siggy's death is incorrectly analyzed by Miller who states that

> Siggy's fate is the first indication of that element of mishap which frequently intrudes in Irving's universe, sometimes, as in Siggy's case, fatally--even in peacetime his characters are continually under siege by forces that seem to conspire against them.[23]

Miller confuses Fate, which ultimately controls the course of the character's lives, for these imagined "forces that seem to conspire against them." Moreover, Miller fails to see that the importance of this force is not only in what it does to the characters and how it twists their lives, but is also in the characters' recognition or lack of recognition of this force and in how the characters react to it. Siggy's fate is not as important in Irving's vision as is Siggy's acceptance of his lack of final control and how he deals with this knowledge.

Siggy is one of Irving's many protagonists who does recognize that he ultimately has no control over his life and yet goes on, trying to find some meaning in living. Although Miller sees this ability in Siggy, he does not give it the significance it deserves in an analysis of Irving's work because he does not study this aspect of Irving's novels. Miller states that

> in the world of Irving, however, "hurt" is always lurking somewhere, as Siggy, despite his idealism, recognizes in one of his poems: "Fate waits/While you hurry/Or while you wait,/It's all the same to Fate."[24]

Miller does see that although Siggy recognizes that he cannot in any way influence or change his fate, he remains optimistic, believing that he can make a difference in the world. However, this attitude is not only Siggy's quirky way of surviving, it is also Irving's solution for living realistically

without losing hope. In this poem, Siggy means that one must go on despite what Fate has for him or her. This mixture of recognition and understanding is also seen in Bogus Trumper (*WMM*), in Severin Winter (*158-P*), in both Jenny Fields and T.S. Garp (*Garp*), in John Berry (*Hotel*), in Homer Wells (*Cider*) and, somewhat differently, in Owen Meany and in John Wheelwright (*Prayer*).

Some critics do not fully recognize the life-affirming element in Irving's work which becomes evident when the various effects that this governing power has on his characters are studied. Gabriel Miller, in his analysis of Irving's second novel, *The Water-Method Man*, does not completely understand the change which Trumper goes through. Miller states that

> the overpowering pressure of external reality is central to Irving's fiction, and the sense of it traumatizes his protagonists, especially such sensitive ones as Trumper and Garp, who react to the world by trying to withdraw from it, desperately attempting to shelter their children from any exposure to pain or suffering.[25]

Miller mistakes "the overpowering pressure of external reality" for what Irving shows to be Fate, the controlling force of the universe which exists independently and which decides every character's ultimate destiny. Trumper, and later Garp, only withdraw from the world initially. Both come to realize that although a greater power controls what opportunities they will receive in their lives, they must take all that is given to them, both the good and the bad, and go on, trying to live a meaningful life.

Irving's ultimate message in *The Water-Method Man* is not that the world is an unrelenting, violent place where all Trumper can hope to do is survive. This view of what Irving is attempting to say in *WMM* is possible only if one does not look further enough beneath the actual events to examine why the characters act as they do. Harter and Thompson misinterpret Trumper's motivation in finishing his doctoral thesis, stating that,

> his [Trumper's] eventual completion of an accurate, scholarly translation symbolizes (as does his willingness to undergo the urinary operation) his personal development. He must and does

> accept the fact that the clumsy epic, like life, "ends rather badly."[26]

Trumper's completion of his doctoral thesis symbolizes not only his personal development, but also his acceptance of the role Fate plays in his life. He does not accept that life must "end rather badly," only that he cannot ultimately control the course of his life. He learns to live well, embracing his destiny and using all of the opportunities which come to him, despite his inability to stop the unfortunate and even violent events in his life. Like most of Irving's characters, he learns to do more than survive and he learns that the fate of *Akthelt and Gunnel* is not necessarily his fate. Near the end of the novel, Irving states that "it occurred to him [Trumper] that he was actually at peace with himself for the first time in his life...in good company, we can be brave"(*WMM*, 377, 380). Trumper is now brave enough, and aware enough, not only to face the future, but also to anticipate it.

In their discussion of Irving's next novel, *The 158-Pound Marriage*, Harter and Thompson are somewhat confused in their analysis of Irving's message about life which he presents through the development of his characters. They state:

> for becoming fully human in Irving's universe increasingly depends on one's ability to transcend, however momentarily, an always indifferent, often violent world.[27]

In *The 158-Pound Marriage*, Irving is not only trying to show that transcending the world, literally, "to be above, separate from or independent of" the world, is necessary for happiness.[28] Rather, the characters must embrace the world and accept that "everything that befalls was from the beginning destined and spun for thee as thy share out of the Whole."[29] Irving makes it obvious that the world is where happiness lies; happiness comes from transcending our fears of the world, while at the same time, actively trying to live well in the world. This ability does not come from being completely cut off from the world; this ability comes from an

acceptance of the role Fate plays in determining the future and in embracing both the beautiful and the "violent."

Unlike his two earlier novels, *The 158-Pound Marriage* does not contain a narrator whose final acceptance of Fate demonstrates the necessity of this acceptance in living a satisfactory life. Gabriel Miller recognizes the deficiencies in this character and makes the important point that

> the narrator, as mentioned earlier, learns nothing; unlike any of Irving's other protagonists, he remains too preoccupied with himself to gain any useful perspective on the experiences he has been reviewing in his narrative. He never achieves the "wide-angle view." Despite the fact that he provides the perceptive reader enough information from which to draw some conclusions, the narrator himself cannot seem to piece this information together meaningfully.[30]

By expanding this idea of Miller's it becomes obvious that it is because of the narrator's lack of ultimate vision and understanding that the "perceptive reader" finally understands Irving's ideas about living successfully. After his father's death, the narrator tells us "I remember--I will always remember"(*158-P*, 250), but he does not learn from his memory, nor from the lessons of how to deal with his fate, good and bad. One of the final statements that the narrator makes is "I knew once again that I knew nothing"(*158-P*, 254), a fact which is glaringly clear to the reader throughout the novel.

The knowledge or lack of knowledge of the narrator of *The 158-Pound Marriage* is discussed by Michael Priestly who feels that although the narrator does not come to any self-realization, he does come to understand the world more clearly. Priestly sums up the ending of the novel:

> The narrator denies his own vulnerability, which would be exposed if he admitted to writing about human emotions...at the end of the story, the narrator admits that "I knew once again that I knew nothing" because he realizes his own failure. He imposed his own order on the story by telling it in his own self-deceiving way; but once finished, he knew that he was still under the control of the order imposed upon his world by greater forces.[31]

The narrator does continue deceiving himself even after telling the story, fooling himself into imagining that he can control his life. However, the narrator never comes to understand anything about the world or about any greater force in it. All the narrator does understand are his own needs and how to maintain his own selfish emotional isolation. His wife, Utch, tells him "you know *you*, that's all you know."(*158-P*, 240) The narrator ultimately fails to see his place in the world.

Moreover, Priestly's comment about the control that the narrator has over the story that he tells as opposed to the control he has over his life is incorrect because it is inverted. The narrator's telling of the story does not show him that he is subject to the forces of the world, but rather reinforces his delusions of control. He does not know "that he was still under the control of the order imposed upon the world by greater forces"; he continues to believe that he can change the direction of his life in any way he wants.

Unlike Irving's characters who eventually recognize and accept the presence of Fate in their lives, the narrator of *The 158-Pound Marriage* does not ever come to this recognition. He is the only one of Irving's main characters who never develops in this way. He does not learn to take the opportunities that come to him and to deal with his inability to stop the bad which may affect his life. This nameless character never develops enough compassion or feeling for others, including his wife and children, to be given a name or a true identity. Instead of using the opportunity to write about his life and to learn about his mistakes and how to deal effectively with the future, he manipulates the story, giving an inaccurate analysis both to the reader and to himself. Michael Priestly feels he "imposed his own order on the story by telling it in his own self-deceiving way." However, the narrator cannot impose any order on either the story or on his life because he cannot understand, and does not want to understand, anything except his own desires and his own needs.

In *The 158-Pound Marriage*, Irving creates a situation in which the narrator has the opportunity to learn from three other people a better understanding of how to deal with his place in the universe. However, the narrator is too self-absorbed to examine the situation he is in, and never really looks beyond what is happening to him to contemplate why it is happening; he is too desperate to prolong his sexual relationship with Edith to scrutinize the situation objectively. When the relationship among the narrator and his wife Utch, and Severin and Edith Winter, finally dissolves, Severin gives him advice about what is going to happen to them all. He tells the narrator,

> we were all thinking more about ourselves than about Utch. And you were all thinking more about yourselves than about me. Now you just have to be patient and continue to do as you're doing--only a little less aggressively. Help her to hate me, but do it easy. (*158-P*, 245)

The narrator does not realize that Severin is telling him to accept the inevitable. Severin points out an opportunity for the narrator to understand and embrace his destiny. He, of course, fails to see this and responds, "all this hatred isn't necessary" (*158-P*, 246).

However, unlike the narrator in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, the other three main characters do come to recognize the role Fate plays in their lives, in varying degrees and at varying stages. First of all, the character who seems to come to this realization, yet who is the most difficult to analyze as to when and why, is the narrator's wife, Utch. She is the most ambiguous and elusive character in this work. Although one of the major protagonists, she retains less definable characteristics than such minor characters as the narrator's mother and father. The reader gets a much clearer picture of her past, and of what shaped her childhood than who she has become as an adult. It is in this past and in her final actions that her acceptance of her place in an overall scheme can be found.

The first chapter of the novel, "The Angel called *The Smile of Reims*," begins the tale of Utchka's (who is now called Utch) past and lends

evidence to the idea that she recognizes and accepts Fate as the determining force in her life. The reader finds out that Utchka survived her mother's abrupt and violent death, being stuffed in a dead cow's body, being adopted by one of the very people who killed her mother and subsequently living with one of the occupiers of her native country, all of which not only allowed her to survive the Russian occupation of Austria, but to flourish because of it. These horrifying and yet also life-saving events helped Utch to develop her very mature and very Stoic philosophy of "haf patience" (*158-P*, 17). In this chapter, without even understanding the very quality which he is illustrating, the narrator reinforces that this trait characterizes Utch's personality more than any other by telling Severin:

> if those Russians had not tried to move that cow, Utch would have stayed inside her...if that Russian had burned the barn down, she would have stayed...she could have smelled the cow cooking and Utch would have stayed until *she* was done. (*158-P*, 18)

Because Utch does not change significantly through the novel, her continued belief in Fate and her continued acceptance of the effect it has on her life, formed in childhood, can be assumed to remain unchanged.

Irving confirms this assumption as Utch patiently waits for her life to return to some kind of normalcy following the dissolution of her and the narrator's relationship with the Winters. After she finally realizes that her husband is obsessed with the Winters and with making Severin seem like a criminal (the narrator, of course, remains innocent), she decides to leave him. She does not become overly emotional, but very calmly sees what she must do to save her own self-esteem and to protect her children. She tells the narrator, very simply and directly, "you don't understand, I'm going to leave you" (*158-P*, 242). She also makes it physically impossible for the narrator to follow her immediately by taking his passport with her to Austria. Utch shows the reader that she knows she cannot control the course of her life, but she can act with integrity and honesty and thus find fulfilment in whatever direction her life takes.

The other female member of the partner-swapping relationship and the physical opposite of Utch, Edith Winter, also understands the function which Fate plays in her life and learns to accept that knowledge. However, unlike Utch and, as I will later show, unlike Severin, she does not come to this understanding because of her childhood. Edith only begins to understand her own place in the predestined scheme after she realizes that her attempt to find control in her life through the foursome with the narrator and Utch has been unsuccessful. After her discovery of Severin's affair with Audrey Cannon, Edith tells him,

> I'm going to get a lover, and I'm going to let you know about it. I want you to be embarrassed when you make love to me wondering if I'm bored, if he does it better. I want you to imagine what I say that I can't say to you, and what he has to say that you don't know. (*158-P*, 204)

Yet, she does not find the control she wants, not even over Severin, and she discovers that control is not as important as understanding. In the end, she is able to return to her life and to forget her feelings for the narrator. She even offers to give Utch a message in Vienna to try and help the narrator get his family back.

The final character in *The 158-Pound Marriage* who successfully deals with his own lack of control in the ultimate, universal plan is Severin Winter. Like Utch, Severin learned early in life to accept that there are many things he cannot change. He accepts the loss of his parents calmly and does not question the meaning of their deaths. Moreover, after meeting and liking Edith in Vienna, he tells her of his simple hopes:

> I don't want a lot, I just want enough to be able to take the paintings I can't sell with me...and I want enough money to look around for a job in America without having to take a bad one. (*158-P*, 120)

He knows that Edith is able to give him what he needs and he realizes that she *will* give him these things. He is patient and not demanding and takes any opportunities that come to him. He also accepts the sacrifices that he

must make, such as leaving Frau Reiner, Vaso and Zivan, whom he will probably never see again, to have the things he desires.

Severin also is able to accept both the good and the bad of the *ménage é quatre* in which he and Edith become involved. Severin treats and accepts the circumstances which surround and shape the foursome he finds himself involved in with the same calm recognition with which he treats everything. When he finally has to end it, he take full responsibility for his own feelings toward the situation and full blame for the pain he knows is inevitable, stating, "I haven't behaved very well with Edith, and I don't like to behave as I have. I'm very embarrassed about it" (*158-P*, 207). He accepts the bad in his life calmly, but not passively. He actively tries to repair his friendship with the narrator and Utch and his relationship with Edith. He, more than any other character in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, encompasses the healthy and accepting attitude towards his life which Irving advocates in all of his novels.

Another Irving character whose attitude echoes that of Severin Winter in an abbreviated manner is Siggy Javotnik of *Setting Free The Bears*. In some ways, Siggy is too aware of his own lack of control over his ultimate destiny. He knows that he cannot escape the past, which is the reason he writes "The Highly Selective Autobiography of Siegfried Javotnik: Pre-History." This document examines and tries to analyze the failures and successes, of which the former far outnumber the latter, of his parents, their families and friends. By writing this document, Siggy shows that he is very much aware that he can escape neither his own past nor his own predestined future. The "chance" meeting of his parents, followed by his mother's "chance" comforting of his father which led to his birth, which once again led to the "chance" death of his grandmother have taught Siggy that there are no real "chance" events.

Siggy's acceptance and belief in predestination is also evident in his obvious repetition of past events and in his detailed record of this repetition. Half of the entire "Notebook" section outlines a lengthy, detailed "zoo watch" in which Siggy contemplates and plans setting free the animals in

the Vienna zoo. Siggy's feelings about this plan are obvious in his description of a previous "zoo bust" during World War II. He writes that,

> there was also in the city a would-be noble hero, who thought the animals had suffered enough; he foresaw a grand slaughter and figured a way to thwart the butchers. No one knows who he was; he's only known by his partial remains. (*SFB*, 218)

Siggy identifies with this "hero" and feels compelled to repeat his act, even knowing its possible consequences. He is willing to risk injury and even death to do something he feels destined to do. He later reveals that he thinks that the "hero" was Zahn Glanz, his mother's boyfriend before the war reached Austria. Siggy feels more like Glanz's son that his real father's and believes that it is his destiny to try to complete Glanz's failed "zoo bust." Siggy, though not one of Irving's best developed protagonists, shows the strength to face his future and to go forward bravely, despite the bad which may come.

In direct contrast to Siggy is Hannes Graff, the other main character in *Setting Free The Bears* who, unlike Siggy, does not understand himself and who definitely does not accept or even recognize the existence of Fate. Hannes, who is one of Irving's flatter and less unified characters, even fails to learn from the "Notebook" which Siggy leaves him. He does not recognize the ties between the past, present and future nor the patterns in which he has become involved. He takes on Siggy's mission without understanding the reasons Siggy originally took it on. After reading Siggy's "Notebook," he states,

> Well, Siggy, I'm not so sure. I don't think it was the gale of the world that got *you*. Like so many other unfitted parts of your history and your scheme, I'm not convinced by any logic to your comparisons--only hinted, or leapt to, and not clear. It was no gale of the world that got you, Sig. You made your own breeze, and it blew you away. (*SFB*, 265)

Hannes does not understand that Siggy was trying to deal with his knowledge of "gale of the world" or the "Fate of the Universe" and was surely destined to die young.

In the end, it is unclear whether or not Hannes has learned what Siggy knew. He acknowledges the things which he must deal with, such as visiting Ernst Watzek-Trummer, seeing Gallen, and mourning Siggy. However, Hannes also states that, "for sure--for the moment, at least--there was no gale hurrying me out of this world" (*SFB*, 340). Hannes does not seem to clearly understand that this force is not only a violent "gale," it is the shaping Fate behind all that happens in the universe and must be accepted in order to find fulfilment in life.

In the most interesting and coherent of the early novels, *The Water-Method Man*, Irving is far more successful in creating characters whose lives are changed by their abilities to acknowledge their places in a world ruled by Fate. This work contains many characters who calmly accept all parts of their lives as necessary. The first of these characters is Cuthbert Bennett or Couth, the oldest and best friend of Bogus Trumper, the narrator of *The Water-Method Man*. Couth seems to be able to deal calmly and rationally with anything that happens. He is described early on in the novel by Biggie, Bogus's first wife, as "content" and "peaceful" (*WMM*, 156). However, this does not mean that Couth is complacent; he simply deals with all aspects of his life and finds happiness and contentment wherever he can. When Biggie decides to leave Bogus, after he has deserted her, and moves in with Couth, Couth does not allow guilt or a false sense of morality to rob himself and Biggie of happiness. He does not question why she has now chosen him, but simply accepts that she is meant to be with him. When Bogus finally returns from Europe, Couth modestly and gently tells him "Bogus, I'm sorry" (*WMM*, 299). Couth helps Bogus learn to accept that no one can control what will happen, but can control how he or she reacts to what does happen, because Couth himself understands this so well.

Another character in *The Water-Method Man* who shares, at least partially, Couth's ability to understand how Fate shapes everyone's lives

is Bogus's first wife, Sue "Biggie" Kunft-Trumper. Biggie is one of Irving's most successful attempts at showing someone who is obviously shaped by her fluctuating belief in how much control she has over her life. She easily accepts her unplanned pregnancy shortly after meeting Bogus. She marries him and tries to believe that they can make a life together. However, she soon learns that they cannot really control anything except their own choices. She finds that she cannot change Trumper's lack of commitment to anything, any more than she can make their lives financially more stable.

This realization is the beginning of Biggie's understanding that she must accept that all the events in her life have a purpose, and must make the most of what she has. After coming home, bloody and wearing an unused condom following a failed attempt to seduce a young student, Trumper flees the life he has been unable to make successful and Biggie finally accepts that she has very little control over her life. But instead of becoming despondent, she decides to take this opportunity and leaves Bogus for Couth. When Bogus returns, she very gently and kindly explains that she has a new life and does not try to hurt him, stating, "I'm here for good...don't make me tell you how much I love him, Bogus. I don't feel like hurting you" (*WMM*, 302). She has accepted that she has to be happy for the things she has, not mourn what she has lost.

Bogus's second wife, Tulpen, also understands how to survive the inevitable disappointments in her life and to enjoy the good parts. But, unlike Biggie, Tulpen seems to have this understanding from the first time she appears in the novel. She reacts to Trumper's excuses concerning his refusal to have an operation which would correct his chronic urinary problems with silence and by lifting "the back of her hand and one breast stands up" (*WMM*, 16). When she suggests to Bogus, during his son Colm's visit, that they have a baby and he reacts callously, she tells him "suit yourself, Jack" (*WMM*, 200). She decides to try and get pregnant despite Bogus's feelings, telling him that she will raise the child with or without him, stating "there's no need to feel trapped, Trumper. That's not what

babies are for" (*WMM*, 272). Tulpen accepts Bogus' flaws and goes on trying to be happy anyway.

At the end of the novel, Tulpen concedes to Bogus's return with caution, but with a willingness to forgive and to go on. She asks him, "You just feeling guilty? Because I don't need that. You owe me nothing more than your straight, honest feelings, Trumper" (*WMM*, 365). She can accept whatever will happen, even if it does not initially make her happy. However, Irving does not make Tulpen a perfect, inhuman machine. She tells Trumper, "you hurt me like hell, Trumper, do you know that?" (*WMM*, 369). Tulpen is clearly a person whose life is shaped by her acceptance of Fate and who helps Trumper to find his own acceptance.

The only narrator or main protagonist in these first three novels who, through the course of the novel, begins and completes the move from misunderstanding and fighting his fate to acceptance of change and trying to understand his place in the ultimate scheme is Bogus Trumper. At the beginning of the novel, Bogus explains his nickname, stating, "that was the invention of my oldest and dearest friend, Couth, who coined the name when he first caught me lying. The name stuck" (*WMM*, 16). *Bogus* "Fred" Trumper does not fight his fate by trying to control everything that happens to him, as do later characters such as Garp, but he does fight it by lying to himself about what is happening to him and by extending those lies to everything he does.

Although Bogus desperately wants to think that he has control over his life, he consistently denies responsibility both for his successes and for his failures. This hiding from his fate by lying about his life is evident in his early relationships. His entire relationship with his first wife, Biggie, centres around Bogus's ability to live in a fantasy which denies a reality which is both wonderful and terrifying. He falls into his life with Biggie, accidentally getting her pregnant and complacently marrying her. When she tries to make Bogus confront his father who has disinherited him because of his marriage, Bogus cannot find the desire to even speak to his father, to try and make a better life for his family. At this point in his

development, Bogus finds it easier to hide from his own life, instead of dealing with it.

This complacency becomes even more evident by examining the end of Bogus's marriage to Biggie and the beginning of his life without her. Trumper forgets to remove the condom after his failed attempt at an affair. Instead of dealing with Biggie's accusations, Bogus flees and goes to Europe, deserting both his wife and his son. On the plane to Frankfurt, he tells the stewardess the things he should have told Biggie: "Oh, I'm sorry, oh, I'm sorry. Really I *am* sorry. I really am sorry, really! Fuck it, anyway, damn it! But I *am*! So very fucking sorry" (*WMM*, 214). Because he cannot deal with the consequences of his own actions he gives up all hope and flees.

Bogus not only flees from his family because he cannot accept and understand how Fate controls the choices he must make, but he also goes looking for Merrill Overturf, a friend from his youth who also lives in his own fantasy world. Merrill is a diabetic who habitually abuses his body, not taking his insulin at the correct times and drinking prohibited alcohol. During the first meeting between Bogus and Biggie, Merrill passes out, forcing Bogus to save him by checking his urine and administering his insulin. Merrill becomes a symbol for Bogus of defiance, of trying to escape his own destiny. Yet, during his search, all Bogus finds is a man who drowned searching for an imaginary tank in the Danube.

The change which allows Bogus to finally accept his place in the universal plan and to find some happiness begins with his relationship with Tulpen. From the beginning of their relationship, he recognizes her calm acceptance of whatever happens to her. However, even this recognition and living with this woman cannot immediately change Trumper. He becomes frightened of his feelings for Tulpen and the prospect of becoming a father again. Instead of dealing with his fears, Trumper purposely misinterprets an innocent meeting between Tulpen and their friend, Ralph Packer, deceiving himself into believing he now has a legitimate reason to leave her. He flees to Biggie and Couth's place and when Biggie asks why

he left Tulpen, he says, "I don't know."(*WMM*, 342) All Trumper does know is that he has no idea who he is or where his life is going so he must flee and hide from whatever may be waiting for him.

However, after leaving Tulpen, Bogus decides to finish his doctorate in his search for meaning in his life and a way to define himself. After seeing Ralph's movie of his life, entitled *Fucking Up*, Bogus finally decides to go back to Tulpen and accept his imperfect but fulfilling life with her. He has come to accept his own lack of ultimate control in his life and not to question everything. Bogus finally finds the courage and the desire to use the opportunities that are being offered to him, telling Tulpen, "I came here because I want you. I need you. Will you marry me, Tulpen?" Although he certainly is not perfect, Bogus has been changed by his new understanding of Fate and by his new willingness to accept what he cannot change.

Although these early novels by Irving are not as thematically concise or as well developed as his later works, they are shaped around peculiar, unusual characters who in turn are shaped by Fate and their capacity for realizing the role it plays in their lives, understanding this role and accepting it. Irving is extremely successful, especially in *The Water-Method Man*, easily the best of the early novels, in illustrating his Stoic ideas of how one should live, and of how to be as happy as possible, while acknowledging how difficult this can be. This idea is further developed and evolved in his later works until its culmination in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

Chapter 3

John Irving's fourth novel, *The World According to Garp*, is unquestionably his most read and discussed work. Although many reviews were written after its publication, little has been written concerning its place in Irving's body of work. Perhaps because of this, critics have sometimes failed to see past the violence in *The World According to Garp* to the force which controls the violence and the death along with the goodness and the life in this work. An examination of the fully mature Irving evident in *Garp* reveals characters who are more multi-dimensional and "believable," along with a "world" which is considerably more promising while at the same time more violent than in any of his three earlier novels. This world is more clearly controlled by Fate, which the characters name "the undertoad," and yet, the characters also have additional power to affect the courses of their lives because they try harder to understand the true significance of the events in their lives. Most of the characters in *The World According to Garp* either understand the role which Fate plays in their lives at the beginning of the novel or come to understand this role during the progression of the novel.

William Nelson states that the world depicted in *The World According to Garp*

> is a world given over to Chance, to unmanageable changes in the human condition; it is a world of forces that are, if not perverse from some malign agency, become perverse through their out-of-proportion effects on the lives of the characters.[32]

Nelson completely overlooks the changes in the lives of the characters which bring happiness and love. His view of Garp's world implies that the characters who exist within it are helpless, controlled completely by "perverse forces" and unable to affect their own lives in any way. Nelson does not see that this force, Fate, brings the characters opportunities both for sorrow and tragedy and for happiness. The true importance that Fate

has in this work is more than simply the direct effect it has on the characters' lives, but also how the characters react to it and how they become better people by successfully dealing with it. The power which shapes *Garp*'s world makes the characters who they are, with the hopeful result that they will learn and grow and become more mature and emotionally healthy people.

In *The World According to Garp*, Irving has created a protagonist, T. S. Garp, who, through the course of the novel, comes to recognize that the same power which shapes the universe also controls what happens in his life and is positively changed as a direct result of this newfound knowledge. Gabriel Miller, in his analysis of Garp's maturation, feels that

> Garp's personal metamorphosis is... a gradual evolution in sensibility from the sex-limited awareness of a confused, aggressive maleness to the broader vision and constructive conservatism of mature fatherhood. As befits his artistic role, in addition, this developmental progress finds clearest reflection in the writing career that parallels his private life, demonstrating at each stage the kind and degree of his emotional adjustment.[33]

Garp's true spiritual development encompasses not only becoming a mature father or a better writer, but also encompasses Garp coming to accept that he can control neither the course of his own life nor the courses of his family members' lives. He learns, slowly, and with the help of family and friends, that he can only try to do the best with what Fate brings into his life, utilizing the positive and dealing with the negative, and learning from both. This development is revealed in his ability at the end of the novel to return to writing a completely fictional novel, after relying for a long period on autobiography. Garp no longer needs to try to control his life through his work, abandoning any attempt to manipulate "the 'mere accidents and casualties of daily life, and the understandable trauma resulting therefrom'" (*Garp*, 563). In a review of *Garp* which includes an interesting and enlightening interview with Irving, Greil Marcus analyzes how Irving uses violence in Garp and tries to understand why that violence is so effective. He states,

> *Garp* is not a book for the fainthearted, not because it contains so much violence... but because its violence cuts. The characters who suffer it are neither types nor walking metaphors; they're unique, and we're caught up with their adventures and follies. But on a less obvious level, the violence cuts because in *Garp* Irving has taken that European sense of dread, that refusal of surprise in the face of disaster and crime, and brought it home.[34]

This Stoic attitude of "refusal of surprise in the face of disaster and crime" becomes more and more evident as the novel progresses, especially in the way T.S. Garp reacts to the violence he encounters in his own life and in the world in general. By the end of the novel, this "refusal of surprise" extends not only to the violence in the characters' lives, but also to the positive and sometimes wonderful things that happen to them.

One of the characters who, from the beginning of this work, accepts the role Fate plays in her life is Garp's mother, Jenny Fields. Jenny is also the character who most successfully illustrates Marcus's "refusal of surprise" attitude toward the world, which is evident in her from the beginning of the novel until her death. This attitude shapes Jenny's life and directs her decisions about how to live that life and about how to make herself happy. One example of this attitude can be seen in the circumstances surrounding Garp's conception and the way in which he is raised. Jenny decides that she wants to have a baby while she is working as a nurse during World War II. She envies the women having babies who have no husbands and decides that

> it was, to her, the ideal situation: a mother alone with a new baby... a young woman with her own child, with a life ahead of them--just the two of them. (*Garp*, 15)

Having decided that she wants a child, but does not want a husband or any kind of a relationship with a man, she patiently waits to find her opportunity to have all that she considers "everything," despite the treatment she knows she will have to endure from her family and from society in general. She acknowledges and accepts the negative consequences of her actions, before she even has to deal with them.

This early display in Jenny of her calm acceptance of what she cannot change in her life and her ability despite this knowledge to go on and to try make herself happy becomes even more evident in the way she raises Garp. After being fired from her job at Boston Mercy Hospital because of her pregnancy, she bravely moves in with her parents, ignoring their condemnation and embarrassment, and prepares for the birth of her child. Jenny Fields then refuses to take a job at an all girl's school, despite her own wish to and accepts a position at The Steering School, an all boy's school, despite her general dislike of men. She becomes determined to "endure her confinement there--through young Garp's prep school years," so that he may attend the school and get a decent education (*Garp*, 34). She easily sacrifices her own immediate desires, viewing her situation as a challenge, to give her son what she considers to be the best. She does not pity herself for her misfortune at having been given a male child, although he is a member of a sex she does not like and certainly does not admire or respect. She simply sees every part of her destiny as a challenge, a battle and believes that there were "always more and larger battles ahead" (*Garp*, 64).

Moreover, this acceptance and understanding of a greater force directing her life is emphasized through Jenny's dealings with other women, right up until her death at the hands of a male desperately trying to control his own life. Irving introduces Jenny in the first chapter of the novel, stating, "Garp's mother, Jenny Fields, was arrested in Boston in 1942 for wounding a man in a movie theater" (*Garp*, 1). She attacked this man for trying to molest her physically, cutting his arm and his upper lip with a scalpel she carried in her purse. In Jenny, Irving has created a character who is prepared for anything which may happen, not necessarily expecting the worst, but always prepared for it. She understands and acknowledges the drawbacks of being a single, working woman in a society who suspects anyone who is not "somebody's wife or somebody's whore--or fast on your way to becoming one or the other" (*Garp*, 13). She does not worry about

what may happen to her; she simply deals calmly and rationally with all aspects of her fate.

However, Irving does not make Jenny simply a character who can accept the negative and sometimes violent events in her life; he compounds her problems by forcing her to deal not only with her own problems and with those of her family and friends, but also with the problems of all women. From the first moment she becomes "completely taken with the idea of writing something," she is destined to attract the wounded and hurt among the women of the United States. Through the course of the novel, Jenny evolves into a character who shares her calm acceptance of a unifying and controlling force with others. She accomplishes this, first through her book, *A Sexual Suspect: The Autobiography of Jenny Fields*, and later through her use of her family home, Dog's Head Harbor, as a refuge for women who need "a place where worthy women can go to collect themselves *and just be themselves, by themselves*" (*Garp*, 527), and by publicly speaking out for women's rights. She accepts the inevitable setbacks in her life, such as the death of her youngest grandson, Walt, which is compounded by both the emotional and the physical injuries of Garp, Helen and Duncan. She privately deals with her own grief and pain, never questioning why the tragedy occurred, and devotes her time to helping her family heal and grow together once again. Even the countless death threats she receives as a result of her public defense of women are calmly dealt with as simply another part of her life which she cannot control and which she must accept.

Jenny Fields's daughter-in-law, Helen Holm (Garp) is another character in *The World According to Garp* who demonstrates, through her relationships with other characters, her ability to accept that she cannot control much of what happens in her life and yet to still go on trying to find happiness. This is evident in the quiet and composed manner in which she deals with the various stages of Garp's writing. Helen is able to accept that Garp may need to write about things in their life which she does not want revealed to the public as his way of dealing with them. After the Garps'

semi-disastrous affair with the Fletchers, Garp writes about a supposedly fictional foursome who engage in the same type of affair. Following the publication and failure of this work, Helen does not become angry with Garp. She simply tells him how she feels about this type of work and about this work in particular, stating,

> you're always telling me that autobiographical fiction is the *worst* kind... You're blind, you have your own terms for what's fiction, and what's fact, but do you think other people know your system? It's all your *experience* - somehow, however much you make up, even if it's only an imagined experience. People think it's me, they *think* it's you. And sometimes I think so, too. (*Garp*, 225, 227)

She does not deny that this novel, suitably titled, *Second Wind of the Cuckold*, which exposes an intimate part of her life, embarrasses her. She tells Garp that she is disappointed that he feels the need to resort to writing this type of fiction, but she does not allow this work to change her life or to upset her for very long. Similarly, when Garp begins writing *The World According to Bensenhaver*, following the death of their son, she tells him, "I won't read it. Not one word of it. I know you have to write it, but I never want to see it" (*Garp*, 390). Helen is capable of understanding Garp's needs and accepting them, even when they may hurt her or when they may be completely different from her own.

However, Helen is not so perfect in her understanding that she becomes a caricature. When she discovers that Garp has had affairs with two of their babysitters, she remains "even and cool." She simply confronts Garp, saying: "Fucking lust... I think it's shabby. It's really beneath me; it's beneath you. I hope you've outgrown it" (*Garp*, 217). There is, however, evidence that Helen does not deal with Garp's infidelities as well as she might at first appear to. She gradually becomes more bothered by Garp's "eccentricities" and feels that he has neglected her in many ways. When he writes a shallow and self-indulgent story to impress her and to make himself feel more confident, ignoring her need for his undivided attention and affection, she feels as though "he had released her" and believes she

is justified in also having an affair (*Garp*, 333). Helen accepts that although it may ultimately have negative consequences, she is meant to engage in an affair to salvage her own self-confidence and her feelings for Garp. She consequently initiates an affair with one of her students, an act which she knows is foolish and for which she once criticized her colleague, Harrison Fletcher. Although this act reveals a lot of unacknowledged resentment towards Garp's infidelities, it also shows that Helen is willing to take action and deal with her negative feelings, trying to find a way to alleviate them and regain her confidence.

Finally, Irving places Helen in a situation which happens as a direct result of her affair with her student, Michael Milton, and which truly reveals Helen's acknowledgement of her inability to change her life and her mature acceptance of this fact. After Garp discovers the existence of Helen's affair with Milton, her attempt to terminate it transforms into a horrifying accident causing injury to Helen, Garp, Duncan and Milton and causing the death of Walt. Because of her acceptance of Fate, Helen does not blame herself or feel that she caused the tragedy and thus does not try to punish herself by giving up her family. She initially deals with her pain by tending to Duncan's physical and emotional injuries, sitting with him, reading to him and helping him to develop his artistic interests. The passage of time does not cause Helen to question her role in the accident; as the narrator states, "in her later life, Helen would spare herself considerable unhappiness by refusing to feel guilty" (*Garp*, 380). Helen also finds a means of successfully dealing with the loss of her youngest child, Walt, without trying to find someone or something to blame. When she can no longer keep herself busy with Duncan's needs and must face life without Walt, she tells Garp "I want another child" (*Garp*, 397). This brings them close to each other again and allows Helen to hope once again that the future will bring them more good than bad.

The final character in this work I will examine is T.S. Garp, the central character. Although there are other interesting characters in *The World According to Garp*, my examinations of Jenny, Helen and, finally, Garp

himself, will thoroughly demonstrate Irving's Stoic ideas in this novel. Through the course of his life, T.S. Garp progresses from attempting to control every aspect of his life to accepting finally that his life is not under his control and that he must try to be as happy as possible because everything that Fate brings to his life has a purpose. By examining some of Garp's writing, both for its origins and how it is affected by his life, his need to try to manipulate everything in his life will become apparent.

Garp's first successful effort at writing, *The Pension Grillparzer*, although one of the best pieces he would ever write, came not out of a desire to write, but out of a desire to "become a writer" and thus convince Helen Holm to marry him. Garp is infatuated with Helen from his first meeting with her and when she tells him "if I marry anybody, I'll marry a writer... a *real* writer" (*Garp*, 89), he decides to become such a writer. Near the end of his life, after he has learned to accept his fate, Garp also realizes that he was meant to become a writer and could not have been anything else.

Later in Garp's writing career, after he has achieved some success, he becomes more manic about controlling his life, especially in any matters concerning his family, and his writing becomes centred around this need for control. His second novel, *Second Wind of the Cuckold*, is written entirely out of his feelings of helplessness and anger. During his and Helen's affair with the Fletchers, Garp does not mean to fall in love with Alice and he does not mean for her to fall in love with him. He cannot control how important she becomes to him and when the affair is ended by Helen, he feels that he cannot be angry with or blame her. Garp wants to change the situation completely so that he can have both Helen and Alice without either being hurt. These feelings become Garp's second novel, *Second Wind of the Cuckold*. He channels his almost obsessive need to control his life into this novel in which he and he alone decides the outcome of the lives of the two couples. At this point, he cannot accept that the negative parts of his life have a purpose in an overall plan and he must learn from them. Instead, he wants desperately to decide what negative

events he and his family must deal with so that he can also decide how it will affect them.

The best example in Garp's writing of his need to direct and restrict the lives of his family along with his own life is found in his third novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*. Following the disastrous affair between Helen and Michael Milton, and the subsequent car accident, Garp directs all of his anger and pain into this novel. He obviously feels cheated by the death of his youngest son and by the physical and emotional pain that he and his family are forced to suffer. In this novel, Garp creates a situation in which the main character is able to fight back, is able to regain control of the violent and unjust situation into which she is forced. Hope Standish survives to be reunited with her husband and her child. She is able to manipulate the situation so that her child is protected and she is able to punish the man who attacks her. Unlike Garp, who feels unable to change anything in his life or to protect his family, Hope controls her fate. Garp's writing reveals his unfulfilled need to restrict the events of his life and of his family's lives through his attempts to rewrite his own immediate past through the fictional lives of his characters.

Garp's need to manipulate his life is also evident in other areas. When Garp loses his ability to write and must find other ways to direct his life, such as after the failure of *Second Wind of The Cuckold*, he directs his energy to controlling and changing the parts of his life which make him angry because they do not conform to his needs. He begins answering his own hate mail, such as the letter from Mrs. I. B. Poole. He feels the need to try and explain his writing to her and writes her a very long, involved letter which he fails to recognize is as obtuse in meaning as the novel she had criticized. When he cannot change her opinion, he becomes even more frustrated and writes "You should either stop trying to read books, or you should try a lot harder" (*Garp*, 237). Instead of accepting that he cannot force this woman to change her mind, nor manipulate her into liking his novel, he becomes angry and refuses to accept defeat.

Later in the novel, Garp also tries to control the opinion that the Ellen Jamesians hold about the righteousness of their cause, an act which Helen sees as futile from its inception. The narrator states at the time of Garp's crusade to change the Ellen Jamesians that

> although he saw that the Ellen Jamesians were fading from fashion, they could not fade fast enough to suit Garp. He wanted them gone; he wanted them more than gone--he wanted them disgraced. (*Garp*, 536)

Garp tries to remove a dangerous, extremist idea from a very sick group of women. He does not see that he cannot control the courses of their lives and cannot change their ideas. Garp cannot accept that Fate determines if these women will survive and what they will or will not accomplish. He cannot accept that something that is very important to him is completely out of his control.

Nevertheless, it is evident early in the novel that Garp *does* have the capacity to come to recognize his own place in Fate's overall plan. In his role as the domestic member of his marriage, he sees that there are areas in which he can excel. He rejects the simple things that he cannot control such as growing plants and embraces areas such as cooking and house cleaning. In a very basic way, Garp is aware, even as a young man, that there are areas in life which he cannot manipulate regardless of how determined he is to do so and thus he avoids these areas. However, it is only after an attempt is made on his life by an angry, crazed Ellen Jamesian that Garp comes to recognize consciously that he cannot change the course of his life. He does not try to manipulate the results of the accident by removing the note from the woman which states "You asked for this" (*Garp*, 558). He allows the situation to continue as it was meant to and not as he wishes.

Following this averted experience with his own death, Garp becomes more tolerant of the women at Dog's Head Harbor. He even gives a reading of "The Pension Grillparzer" to them, simply for their pleasure and without trying to manipulate them. He also become less judgmental in his view of

the Field's Foundation applicants and accepts that people have bad things happen to them which are neither their fault nor under their control. When considering a potential applicant, he tells the board "Look, she's had a hard life, isn't there enough money?" (*Garp*, 564). He also writes an apology to the magazine which published his attack on the Ellen Jamesians in which "he apologized for the vehemence and self-righteousness of his remarks" (*Garp*, 562). Like Bogus Trumper, Garp is able to put aside his anger and resentment and is able to look to the future with hope and with acceptance for what will come.

The final evidence that Garp has, by the end of the novel, developed an acceptance of Fate and an ability to deal with an unknown and uncontrollable future is found in his return to imagination and to pure fiction in his writing. Once Garp puts aside his need to manipulate and fixate on his own life, he is able to begin imagining another world where characters are shaped by both positive and negative events. He is now able to focus on creating instead of on "the 'mere accidents and casualties of daily life, and the understandable trauma resulting therefrom'" which has crippled his writing in the past (*Garp*, 563).

In *The World According to Garp*, Irving has created a complex world where the main characters are shaped by the degree of their ability to accept the lives they are given by Fate and to understand and accept their own degrees of control in those lives. The violence in this novel, often discussed as the most prominent element, is simply one of the many parts with which they must contend with and yet still have hope for the future. Although these characters do all eventually come to accept their roles within Fate's plan, they become neither apathetic nor despondent, but try to make the most of the chances they receive and try to live as completely and as happily as possible.

Chapter 4

John Irving's fifth novel, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, centres around the Berry family. The Berrys struggle to remain a family in the face of numerous violent tragedies, including the deaths of three of their members. They survive by relying on each other and by developing, individually and at varying rates, an attitude of acceptance toward their destinies and the knowledge that they have no control over their lives. They do not waste their lives questioning the things that happen to them. Instead, they try to learn from their experiences, treating violence and death as necessary and important parts of life. The characters who most exemplify this struggle are Win, Frank, Franny, Lilly and John, the narrator. The other two members of the family, Mother and Egg, are not fully developed characters and function only to illuminate the internal struggles of the other characters.

The Hotel New Hampshire has been accurately described by R. Z. Sheppard as "a quiet balancing of sorrow and hope." Although very different from Irving's previous works, particularly *The World According to Garp*, this novel is united to these other works by the presence of Fate which increasingly determines the direction of the lives of the characters. The members of the Berry family do not change as overtly as the characters of Irving's earlier novels. However, they do mature and grow as individuals as a result of their coming to accept Fate as the controlling force in their lives.

In studying Irving's work, many critics have focused on the violent elements and have not recognized its true place in his fiction. Yet, others have recognized that his skillful integration of these very real elements of life with equally as real joyous elements is one of his strengths. In a comparison of *The Hotel New Hampshire* with Irving's earlier works, Nancy Walker states,

> violence is given the same matter-of-fact approach as are other extremes in Irving's fiction. It is present, if unwelcome, merely because it exists as a part of life. Irving is never sentimental or dramatic about motorcycle accidents, terrorists's bombs, bees which kill [sic], or gearshifts which blind children; these are the risks of living.[35]

Walker understands that violence is not what truly shapes Irving's work, nor what truly shapes the characters which dominate that work. In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, violence exists not only as a natural part of life, but as a part of the unavoidable path along which Fate, often referred to by the characters in this novel as "Sorrow," moves those characters, despite their efforts to resist.

The characters in *The Hotel New Hampshire* even develop ways of helping each other and themselves to accept and survive the blows, usually in the form of violence and death, which are part of their destinies. Walker states that, in contrast to *The World According to Garp*,

> Irving seems to have become reconciled to the need for illusion as a means of survival. No longer are dreams only irresponsible fantasies or terrible nightmares; they are what enable most people, in the refrain of the novel, to "keep passing the open windows" rather that taking a suicidal plunge.[36]

In this novel, most of the characters are able to dream about the future with hope. Most of them come to face the future with hope. These characters survive because they are able to hold onto their dreams of the future, dealing with and learning from the violent event in their lives.

Gabriel Miller offers an insightful, although somewhat limited, analysis of *The Hotel New Hampshire*. He focuses much of his analysis on fitting the novel into a formula designed to further his ideas concerning the growth of these characters. He states that,

> Like all of Irving's novels, [those written before *Hotel*] *Hotel* reflects much violence and adversity, but like *Garp*, and like all fairy tales, its narrative insists that a rewarding and fulfilling life is within one's grasp despite great hardship... thus, he suggests one may achieve a true and lasting identity, establishing a strong

> personality in the struggle against the impersonal forces of death and destruction which menace this life.[37]

The characters' struggle against death and destruction is really a struggle to recognize and embrace the presence of a controlling force in their lives, Fate or "Sorrow." The characters in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, like those in *Garp*, must learn to accept that they do not have to "deserve" everything that happens to them. They must learn that Fate is the giver of both the positive and the negative aspects of life and that both are equally important. As they learn to accept the negative and to make the most of the positive, they develop "a true and lasting identity" and find "a rewarding and fulfilling life."

In his discussion of *The Hotel New Hampshire*, Miller demonstrates how this work fits Bruno Bettelheim's formula for fairy tales from his work, *The Uses of Enchantment*. He quotes Bettelheim's "characteristic mode of fairy-tale narrative," and examines how Hotel fits this mode:

> in a fairy tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensive as represented by figures of the story and its events... The unrealistic nature of these tales is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales' concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in the individual.[38]

Hotel, admittedly, does fit much of this formula, as it is the least realistic of Irving's novels, with settings and situations which seem much more symbolic than realistic. However, that is all that Miller examines in this novel. He does not examine the characters outside of this narrow focus and thus overlooks how their belief or non-belief in Fate and their own lack of control shapes their development.

In another, very different examination of *The Hotel New Hampshire* which focuses almost solely on historical and biographical elements of the novel, Edward C. Reilly discusses the meaning given to the Berry's dog, Sorrow. Reilly states that

> the Berry's Labrador retriever--appropriately named Sorrow--becomes an allegory for universal suffering and tragedy. Aged and terminally flatulent, Sorrow is mercifully put to sleep only to be resurrected by Frank, the oldest child, who stuffs and poses Sorrow in an attack and then in a friendly pose: allegorically, as a fact of life, sorrow assumes many guises.[39]

Reilly is correct in saying that Sorrow symbolizes suffering and tragedy. But the dog is only half of the whole picture of inevitability that Irving is trying to paint. Shortly before the Berry family returns to New York from Vienna, John Berry states that "Love also floats. And that being true, love probably resembles Sorrow in other ways" (*Hotel*, 365). The members of the Berry family grow because of their understanding that they do not control their own destinies.

Reilly does seem to come to understand this two-sided force which the Berry's must learn to deal with in another article which discusses Sorrow in detail. He feels that

> as do his other novels [those written before *Hotel*], John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire* ends optimistically yet realistically. From their experiences with sorrow and doom, and from accepting these as part of the realities of life, the Berrys have also learned about two other universals--love and a cautious hope.[40]

Reilly does not, however, recognize that sorrow and doom and love and hope are all governed by Fate and that the characters must learn that these elements are out of their control. Once they can accept this, then they can try to make the most out of their own fates, understanding that all parts of their lives are purposeful.

The first character in *The Hotel New Hampshire* who is shaped entirely by his acceptance of Fate and his undying faith that something good will eventually come to his family is Win Berry. Win desires to create a wonderful world for his children to live in, and he firmly believes this is possible. However, he does not believe that he can deny his own fate or that he can keep his family safe. He simply has hope that he and his family will continue to grow and to learn. In the first Hotel New Hampshire, Win

tries to create both a home for his children and a business that he can run while still being able to spend time with them. He doesn't allow himself to be discouraged by the seemingly endless negative aspects of his plan because he believes that these negative aspects are simply challenges to be overcome. When faced with the screwed down furniture in the old seminary which will become his first hotel, he states, "why should people have to move hotel furniture around?" (*Hotel*, 73).

Following his failure to make the first Hotel New Hampshire profitable, Win refuses to give up his dream and is determined to create a successful hotel. Neither his own failure, nor the deaths of his wife and his youngest son can discourage him. Rather than becoming despondent, he becomes even more determined to make his hotel venture with Freud and Susie the bear work and even names the second hotel, The Hotel New Hampshire. Upon his arrival at the run-down hotel, which is occupied only by whores and radicals, Win immediately begins "making plans" (*Hotel*, 244). The only outward sign of his grief over the loss of his wife and son is that he withdraws a little more and concentrates on making a success of the hotel. John describes him as "more determined to outlive unpleasantries than change them" (*Hotel*, 254). Win believes that "unpleasantries" are a part of life; he accepts them and, in the process of learning from them, tries to become stronger and to wait for the good which he knows must follow.

This quality in Win can also be seen when he is blinded while stopping the radicals from blowing up the opera. He does not question his own role in stopping the radicals, nor why he must help his oldest friend die to accomplish this. He simply takes his family back home to the United States and allows himself to heal while he decides what to do with the rest of his life. Win's ability to understand and accept the presence of a force, Fate, which controls his life, allows him to want to start over. He decides to try, for the third time, to make his dream of running a successful hotel a reality. As he tells Franny: "but what else would I do?" (*Hotel*, 409). For Win, there is no alternative but to accept, and start over.

Win's children also display, to varying degrees, his ability to accept Fate and to push on and try to live as happily and successfully as possible. Frank, the oldest child, comes to share his father's belief only at the end of the novel. As an adolescent, Frank does not believe that he can make his life better, as Win does, by working hard, dreaming, and accepting that he cannot avoid or control the negative aspects of life. Sorrow, the Berry's dog, is put to sleep on the very night that Franny needs him the most: when she is raped. Frank decides to give Sorrow back to her--to undo the unintentional harm created by Win having the dog put to sleep. He tells John that he is "going to *fix* him for Franny, in time for Christmas" (*Hotel*, 118). Frank cannot accept that Sorrow is dead and that no amount of "fixing" will bring him back.

Frank's attitude toward fate changes radically after his failure to change things, or bring any happiness, with his stuffing of Sorrow. He not only eventually accepts that he has no control over his destiny, but he becomes fatalistically despondent and cynical. Frank loses the hope and faith in the future which Irving has shown to be necessary in accepting Fate, and in believing that there is an ultimate plan for everyone. The narrator describes Frank as only believing in

> nihilism, meaning anarchy, meaning trivial silliness and happiness in the face of gloom, meaning depression descending as regularly as night over the most mindless and joyful of days. Frank believed in *zap!* He believed in surprises. He was in constant attack and retreat, and he was equally, constantly, wide-eyed and goofily stumbling about in the sudden sunlight - tripping across the wasteland littered with bodies from the darkness of just a moment ago. (*Hotel*, 259)

Frank does not learn to deal effectively and properly with violence and death or with happiness and wonder. He loses the ability to learn from his grief and disappointment, and allows it to smash his belief in goodness.

However, by the end of the novel, Frank learns that Fate is not trying to cheat him, and that there is an ultimate plan giving meaning to everything. He comes to terms with the deaths in his family, with his inability

to bring back Sorrow, and with his own talents and shortcomings. He comes to believe that he can get through the bad and learn from it and make the most of the good. In the end, Frank

> always kept passing the open windows without the slightest trace of fear. It's what all the great agents do: they make the most incredible and illogical advice sound reasonable, they make you go ahead without fear, and that way you get it, you get more or less what you want, or you get something, anyway; at least you don't end up with nothing when you go ahead without fear, when you lunge into the darkness as if you were operating on the soundest advice in the world. (*Hotel*, 419)

Frank not only gains an acceptance of his life, he also learns to help others to accept theirs as well. As an agent, he helps his clients to have faith that if good is meant to come, it will. Frank tries and works to make things good for both himself and his family, but he no longer wastes energy trying to change what he cannot.

Frank's youngest sister, Lilly, is not as fully developed a character as the older Berry children. Throughout the novel, she struggles with her desire to understand and accept her helplessness, but in the end it overwhelms and destroys her. She is never able to balance her acceptance that an outside force has ultimate control over her life with the feelings of despair and abandonment this acceptance causes her. She fails at everything that is important to her, from growing tall to being a "writer." The success of her first novel simply accentuates this failure because she cannot understand why the book is successful and cannot duplicate that success. She is eventually defeated by this lack of balance and does the only thing she can; she stops passing the open windows, and jumps to her death.

The only other female child in the novel is Franny. She is the only member of the Berry family who demonstrates her ability to accept the dominion of Fate throughout the novel. This acceptance can first be seen after Franny is gang-raped. She is able to deal with the rape on her own, without counselling. Immediately after her rescue, she tells her brother John, "it's just another Halloween, kid" (*Hotel*, 115). But Franny realizes

that her healing will take time and allows herself to bathe whenever she feels the memories are becoming too much for her to handle. She tells John that "Nobody got the fucking me in *me*," and over time she heals herself by believing that no one could touch her unless she wanted them to. Even though she understands that she did not deserve to be raped, she is able to accept that it was meant to happen and concentrates on dealing with it and healing herself.

Moreover, Franny later overcomes her rape-induced fear of having sex by first developing a relationship with a non-threatening woman. She has an affair with Susie the bear to help her overcome her new fear of sex with a man. She knows she is not gay and that when she is ready she will once again sleep with a man. John describes their affair; "Franny was in limbo. She was taking it easy, marking time with Susie the bear" (*Hotel*, 308). Franny finds ways to deal with the violence and death in her life and tries to grow and wait for the better times.

Another difficult part of her life which Franny accepts and deals with is hers and John's obsession for each other. She knows that they cannot have a romantic relationship with each other. She also knows that their obsession will not simply disappear on its own. As with all the areas of her life, Franny knows that eventually she will find a way to deal with John. Her solution teaches both of them that they could not stand the pain that being together would cause them and they consequently find a way to love each other platonically.

Franny later handles her unwanted pregnancy by deciding to accept it and try to make it something positive. Instead of having an abortion, she decides to have the baby and give it to John, who has desperately been wanting one. She tells John, "Junior and I got a little sloppy, and rather than do the modern thing, we thought we knew the perfect mother and father for a baby" (*Hotel*, 442). Franny never questions the way her life goes. She deals with her pain and that of her family by accepting it and going on. She even manages to take a negative event and make it positive.

The last member of the Berry family whose life is shaped by his recognition and acceptance of Fate and the control it has over life is John, the narrator. As the novel progresses, John comes to understand that this force controls his life and, when he does, his life is changed. As an adolescent, John is uncomfortable in situations which allow his family to be scrutinized by outsiders. During the Berrys' New Year's Eve party, John sees his family through the eyes of Sabrina Jones and feels that

> I wished that something powerfully distracting would happen in the Hotel New Hampshire...to distract me from my embarrassment at how (it always struck me) our family must appear to outsiders. (*Hotel*, 172)

John feels as though he must control the impression his family makes on those who do not know them. He needs to control both how others affect his family and how they affect others to avoid any unexpected, possibly negative consequences.

John also does not accept Franny's rape easily and takes years to stop blaming himself for not saving her. He begins to lift weights in the hopes of becoming so strong that he could prevent anyone or anything from ever hurting Franny or the rest of his family again. Lifting weights and running reminds John of Franny's rape and makes him want to lift even more and become even stronger. John admits that "I did it all for Franny." But he does not realize until much later in his life that all of these actions are pointless since he could not prevent that which was inevitable. John must learn that no matter how strong he gets, he cannot change what is meant to happen.

Later, as his family learns to endure death and to enjoy and savour their times of happiness, John begins to understand that he cannot change his fate. When a man in a white tuxedo shows up at the first Hotel New Hampshire, John tries to hide him from Win. He realizes that his father will see the man as some kind of a message or omen and may decide to begin a new dream, dragging his family with him. But, when Win sees the man despite John's efforts, he starts to accept that he cannot alter the

courses of their lives. He decides that he will not try to avoid the change he knows is coming. And thus, John "didn't destroy Freud's letter; I gave it to Father, while the vision of the man in the white dinner jacket was still upon him" (*Hotel*, 192).

Finally, John comes to accede to his own role which evolves independently of any of his attempts to decide what to do with his adult life. He becomes his father's caretaker. He also finally finds a wife when Susie the bear comes to him in the middle of the night. He does not become passive. He simply comes to understand his own lack of control. He knows that he cannot protect his family from the outside world or from violence and death.

The Hotel New Hampshire has been called a fairy tale. If this is true, it is a fairy tale where the characters must learn to endure the role of Fate in their lives. These characters, more than any of Irving's previous creations, grow out of their attitude toward Fate. They must accept not only seemingly mindless violence, rape and death, but also that they can do nothing to influence either the good or the bad in their lives. Those who survive this struggle come to understand that although they do not always know the reason for the things that happen to them, they must see all of them as merely experiences and must keep moving on to the next one.

Chapter 5

In a discussion of his sixth novel, *The Cider House Rules*, John Irving states that "at the end of every good story, there is the suggestion of the idea about how to live a new life."[41] However, from the beginning to the end, this novel develops and presents through the lives of its characters, the idea of how to live a new and a better life. In this novel, Irving once again uses an omniscient narrator, a form he abandoned after *The World According to Garp*, and with it, he regains the realism he moved away from in *Hotel New Hampshire*. The characters in *Cider House* are all unique and border on being outlandish. But, Irving takes these strange characters and grounds them in realistic and detailed settings, and thus, they become believable.

In this work, Irving develops the idea that not only is understanding and accepting Fate necessary for his characters to find happiness, he also shows that the choices they make affect which destiny they will fulfil. The characters must try to find their own destinies and then make the correct choices to complete those destinies. This is especially true of the main protagonist, Homer Wells, who must eventually choose between a life of lies and stolen happiness and a life of truth and usefulness. Homer must realize that

> from virtue alone can happiness and peace of mind result, and virtue consists in submission to the higher Power and all that he sends us, in mastery over our animal nature, in freedom from all perturbation and the entire independence of the Inner Self.[42]

This characteristic in Homer of trying to understand his own destiny is the final step in the development of the characters who will try to obey God's plan in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

In their analysis of *The Cider House Rules*, Harter and Thompson recognize that in this novel, the decisions that the characters must make in their lives are more difficult because the violence in this world is much

more subtle, and right is not necessarily the opposite of wrong. They state that,

> the vigorous polarity of his vision--love and violence--has been the powerful engine that drives his plots...however, the "lunacy and sorrow" have been reduced to eccentricity and sadness.[43]

In this novel, Irving does present love and violence in a very different manner; these "powerful engines" still drive the plot, but they are not always easily distinguishable from each other. The characters are forced to face such seemingly mundane forms of violence as abused wives, illegal and unsafe abortion, and even more ambiguous types of violence such as justified war and legal abortion. These characters must not only accept these types of violence in their lives, but must also make choices about how to deal with them and must also accept the consequences of their decisions. They have more control over their initial choices than Irving's other characters, but Fate decides what will come from these choices and how their lives will be changed.

Many critics have overlooked the role of Fate in this novel in order to discuss, in depth, the more politically important question of how Irving handles the controversial issue of abortion and all of its ramifications. However, in doing so, some critics indirectly recognize the complicated role which exists between Fate and the main characters in this novel. In a discussion of how *Cider* could help to unite those on opposite sides of the abortion issue, Benjamin DeMott states,

> Mr. Irving draws readers close in the space of his imagination, to an understanding of eventual links, commonalities--given unities--between factions now writhing with hatred for each other.[44]

Irving is not only demonstrating the links between these two very different factions, interested only in one issue, he is also showing the link between life and death, between violence and love, and between Fate and the "Independent Self." His characters must decide whether or not to support and practice abortion, and must decide whether or not to accept the role which Fate plays in their lives. They must accept that there are parts of

their lives which they can control and for which they must make decisions; they must also accept that the consequences that come from these decisions are out of their control. Irving's characters learn that they cannot be passive, and must become active participants in their lives, but also must accept that the direction of their lives is not truly in their control.

In a short review of *The Cider House Rules*, Paul Gray feels that Irving goes too far in making his characters accepting of their fates and of the amount of control they have in their lives. He feels that

> Irving's mastery of plot and pacing has never been more engaging. Yet the restrictions imposed by these skills are also evident. In the world according to Irving, characters are the passive victims of life. They are either children or childlike, dependent on forces beyond their control. They "wait and see" (an ongoing refrain in this novel), wondering, like Homer and Dr. Larch, "What is going to happen to me?" What literally happens to them, of course, is the tricks, sometimes macabre, visited on them by their creator.[45]

Mr. Gray makes this erroneous statement because he overlooks the determination of these characters to "be of use" and their ongoing individual searches for fulfillment and happiness. The characters in this novel are far from passive. They make decisions about the directions of their lives, and they learn to deal calmly with the uncontrollable consequences of those decisions. The "tricks" which they must deal with are not simply "macabre" whims of Irving. The characters in this novel are forced to deal with these events because reality is full of uncontrollable, and unpredictable events which everyone must learn to accept. If these characters did not learn to deal with these consequences, they would spend their lives fighting things they cannot control. Like Bogus Trumper and T.S. Garp before they learned to accept Fate, the characters of *Cider House* would spend their lives fighting their destinies and not truly living if they did not learn to accept the balance between Fate and the "Independent Self."

Mr. Gray also states that "the best Irving can offer is a tale that concludes with a few survivors who are not entirely maimed or destroyed by what they have been through."[46] Mr. Gray is correct that some characters do not

survive, but this is because of the lengthy time frame of the novel. Those who do die, do so because of old age, accident or disease. None of the deaths seem unnatural or unnecessary. The survivors of the novel are not seriously and irreversibly maimed nor are they close to death. They are changed by the events they live through, but if they were not, they would be static and flat.

The major characters in *The Cider House Rules* all make, in varying degrees, the move from fighting Fate to accepting it. The character who seems to make this transition the slowest and with the most difficulty and pain is Melony, one of the orphans at St. Cloud's. Melony goes through a difficult transition from feeling anger and pain at her orphaned life to trying to accept her life and find happiness. When she finally does accept her fate, she still searches for signs of meaning in her life and in the world around her.

Melony's inability to accept her destiny first becomes obvious at the beginning of her relationship with Homer Wells. She reveals to him that she wants to see her adoption records to find out the identity of her mother. However, her reason for doing so is not to find out about her family history; Melony wants to find her mother and kill her. She cannot accept that she was left on the doorstep of the orphanage at age four or five with no identification or records. She knows that even if the other orphans have history files containing clues to their parentage, she cannot because of her abandonment. Yet she insists that Homer find her file and when he cannot, she flies into a rage and destroys an old abandoned building. In her desperate search for meaning in her life, for a reason for her life, she hurts Homer and everyone around her. She forcibly tries to create meaning in her life and to grasp the control she longs to find.

After facing the realization that she will never find her mother nor be able to control those in her past, Melony tries to find security in her present. In her rage, Melony misinterprets Homer's words of comfort about her past and forces him to promise that he will never leave her nor the orphanage. This promise gives Melony the illusion of control in her life

and she clings to it. She does not allow herself to see that the promise was not only unfair but also impossible for Homer to keep. Melony, by trying to control her life, and that of the only person she cares about, adds to her own suffering by not understanding that she cannot escape her own fate as Homer cannot escape his.

Melony does not give up her fight for control over her life after Homer finally does leave her and the orphanage. She decides that she must find Homer no matter what the cost. She does not have any idea what she will do when she finds him. Melony simply cannot accept that Homer's destiny has taken him away from her. As she leaves St. Cloud's by train, Melony says "to herself--so vehemently that her breath fogged the window and obscured the abandoned buildings in that forsaken town from her view--'I'm gonna find you, Sunshine'" (*Cider*, 228-229). Having only a few clues as to where Homer has gone, she wastes years searching along the Maine coast for the apple orchard called Ocean View. She develops very few friendships and remains lonely and desperate.

Melony is finally able to accept her fate and her inability to change it when, after many years, she finally finds Homer Wells. During all of her years of searching, Melony had somehow believed that finding Homer would give her control of her life, and allow her to shape her life in any way she wished. But the realization of this wish is not what Melony had hoped. She tells Homer,

> You've got your nose in the air - I got that right. But you ain't exactly no missionary. You're a creep! You knocked up somebody you shouldn't 'a' been fuckin' in the first place, and you couldn't even come clean about it to your own kid. Some missionary! Ain't that *brave*? In my book, Sunshine, that's a creep. (*Cider*, 498)

Melony finally sees that Homer is not a hero who can save her, who can help her to control her disappointing fate. She reestablishes her relationship with her coworker and former lover, Lorna and finally accepts and starts to enjoy her life. After her accidental death, Lorna describes her as "a

relatively happy woman at the time of her accident...she was a daydreamer" (*Cider*, 586). Melony finally finds the understanding to accept her destiny and to stop fighting her life and start enjoying it.

The other dominant female character in *The Cider House Rules*, Candy Worthington (Kendall), at first seems to accept her destiny and yet still work towards the things she wants. Candy, at her introduction in the novel, is not passive and does not hide from the difficult decisions she is forced to make. Before even graduating from high school, she faces an unplanned pregnancy with a mixture of rational thought and emotional pain. In the face of her boyfriend, Wally's uncertainty, she tells him, "No, Wally. I'm all right. It's not the time for us to have a baby" (*Cider*, 184). Although she feels frightened and uncertain about their decision and about their futures, she knows that they are not meant to have a baby yet. Candy does not despair over the hard choices she must face, she accepts her difficulties and moves on in her life.

However, later in her life, Candy becomes unable to deal with her own feelings and with the choices she must make. She can no longer actively deal with the presence of Fate in her life. When Wally goes away to war, Candy and Homer Wells discover that they are in love. Candy cannot decide which man she ultimately wants to be with and so puts off making a decision indefinitely. She tells Homer, "you have to wait and see, for everything - you have to wait and see" (*Cider*, 356). This will become her philosophy for many years and "for the next fifteen years they all wait and see--accepting an understandable but dishonest and increasingly strained status quo."[47] She does not want to hurt either man and so begins a pattern of lies, deceit and hiding; both Candy and Homer spend years trying to keep the truth hidden, denying Wally and Angel the opportunity to understand and accept their own true fates.

Finally, after fifteen years of denying her son and her love for Homer, Candy is able to make a decision and deal with the consequences with the help of a surprising and startling visit from Melony. Melony's appearance at Ocean View shocks both Homer and Candy as they realize that she sees

through their lies about their love for each other and about Angel's true parentage. Homer quickly realizes that they must now tell the truth and face whatever consequences are destined for them. He convinces Candy that the truth is important enough to confront those consequences which they could not ultimately escape anyway. Candy realizes that she can no longer fight Fate by trying to conceal the truth and by trying to control not only her own life but also the lives of her family. She begins her confession to Wally by saying "Wally, I love you" (*Cider*, 579), and embraces what he already knows, that

> It's natural to want someone you love to do what you want, or what you think would be good for them, but you have to let everything happen to them. You can't interfere with people you love any more than you're supposed to interfere with people you don't even know. And that's hard, because you often feel like interfering - you want to be the one who makes the plans. (*Cider*, 569)

She accepts that the future of her family is out of her control and that she must allow each of them to fulfil his own destiny.

The final two characters who demonstrate Irving's philosophy of accepting that Fate has control over the direction of our lives in order to gain control of ourselves and the courage to face the future are Dr. Wilbur Larch and Homer Wells. Dr. Larch, early on in his life, accepts his own driving need to be "useful" and to escape the empty and meaningless existence of his parents. Although he cares for his parents, he also understands that they have both spent their lives trying to escape their destinies and are finally destroyed by their own helplessness.

Soon after entering medical school, Wilbur Larch starts to understand that he cannot control the consequences of his actions. Although he searches for a cure for the gonorrhea he contracted from his first and only sexual encounter, he realizes that he is unable to do anything except relieve his pain and wait until the disease burns itself out. He then accepts that the only control he has in stopping this from recurring is by becoming sexually abstinent. He does not question that he must give up sex, but accepts that

he must if he wants to remain free of this bacteria. Larch shows the easy acceptance of his own destiny, including the painful parts, which Irving demonstrates to be the formula for a meaningful and fulfilling life.

This acceptance also motivates Larch to leave mainstream society in search of a place where he can truly help people. His experiences with unwanted pregnancies in Boston's slums taught him that women need a safe place to have abortions. His understanding of his own inability to affect his fate also showed him that he cannot safely perform these if he is surrounded by a society which openly condemns what it secretly practices. Larch finds a place which is removed from society and which desperately needs his services. He accepts that he must give up a "normal" life to fulfil his destiny and never questions his own "useful" life. He faces the unpleasant events and facts of his life, such as

> later, when he would have occasion to doubt himself, he would force himself to remember: he had slept with someone's mother and dressed himself in the light of her daughter's cigar. He could quite comfortably abstain from having sex for the rest of his life, but how could he ever condemn another person for having sex? He would remember, too, what he hadn't done for Mrs. Eames' daughter and what that had cost. He would deliver babies. He would deliver mothers, too. (*Cider*, 67)

Instead of helplessly despairing over his own part in the death of Mrs. Eames' daughter, who had died trying to get the abortion he refused to give her, he accepts his feelings of guilt and uses them to strengthen his resolve about his place in the world.

The final character in *The Cider House Rules* who is shaped by his understanding of the role which Fate plays in his life is Homer Wells. Unlike Larch, Homer doesn't come to truly understand that Fate controls his life until he is approaching middle age. However, unlike many of Irving's protagonists, he also doesn't actively fight the changes in his life over which he has no control. In this work, Irving is no longer only examining the question of whether or not happiness can be found by accepting both the good and the bad in one's life, but also whether or not

happiness should be the only thing we strive for. Homer Wells does find happiness for fifteen years but that happiness is based on denying who he is, who his son is and what his true purpose is.

As a child, Homer learned that he belonged more at the orphanage where he was born that with any of the families who adopted him. This small understanding of his destiny finally shows Homer that he should give up the search for a family and try to learn as much about the world of the orphanage/abortion clinic as possible. He tells the truck driver who gives him a ride back to St. Cloud's when he leaves his third foster family that "I belong to Saint Cloud's, I got lost...I just belong there" (*Cider*, 20). At this young age, Homer has already learned that there will always be a place that he belongs to and where he can fulfil his destiny.

However, when Homer leaves St. Cloud's, he loses, in the face of the difficult and varied choices of the "real" world, the understanding of where his destiny lies. This process begins with Homer's efforts to avoid remembering his feelings of belonging at St.Cloud's by not communicating with the equivalent of his adoptive father, Wilbur Larch. He waits six weeks after his departure from St. Cloud's to write his first letter to Larch and offers little personal information. He tries to sever all ties to his old home, the place he once knew that he belonged.

Soon after, Homer also begins to live a life based on deceit and the denial of his true fate in the one place where he belongs and where he can truly be useful. When he falls in love with Candy Kendall, the girlfriend of his benefactor and best friend, Wally, who is away at war, Homer convinces himself that he and Candy can have a future together. He wants to believe that Wally is dead and that he and Candy can have their baby, get married and live "happily ever after." Homer does not see that the secrecy and the lies which surround their relationship simply blind him to recognizing what he had once seen as his only choice: to take over for Dr. Larch at St. Cloud's. And thus, Candy and Homer become "just another trapped couple, more comfortable with their illusions that they were with the reality of their situation" (*Cider*, 408).

Homer continues to try and deny his fate, desperately trying to control the path of his life. He even wishes that he could control the passing of the seasons and the time of his child's birth. While awaiting this birth, he hides from his own feelings of helplessness by trying to plant apple trees:

> because he would have to wait to plant the trees, he worried about the roots mildewing, or getting savaged by mice - but mainly he was peeved that he could not control, exactly, the calendar of his life. He'd wanted to plant the trees before Candy delivered. He wanted the hillside entirely planted when the baby was born. (*Cider*, 426)

Yet even in this attempt to fight his feelings of helplessness, Homer is unsuccessful and thwarted by Fate.

After living with lies and deceiving himself about his own control in his life and about his happiness for fifteen years, Homer finally comes to recognize his own destiny once again. After Melony visits and does not hide her disappointment in Homer's life, he tells Candy, "It's time to tell everything. No more waiting and seeing...we're doing the wrong thing. It's time to do everything right" (*Cider*, 501). He is willing to tell the truth to the people that he cares for the most and deal with whatever consequences occur, both good and bad. He comes to this realization suddenly;

> it was clear to him--where he was going. He was only what he always was: an orphan who'd never been adopted. He had managed to steal some time away from the orphanage, but St. Cloud's had the only legitimate claim to him. In his forties, a man should know where he belongs. (*Cider*, 509)

By reaffirming his own unwillingness to try and escape his destiny, Homer regains his "usefulness" and his pride in his life.

In *The Cider House Rules*, Irving further develops his ideas concerning the controlling force of the Universe, Fate, the role it plays in the lives of his characters and how their reactions to it affect the entire structures of their lives. Although he does address the question of abortion, he does so only through how this issue affects the lives of a few of the major

characters. The issue of the morality of abortions is only one more dilemma over which the characters must make choices which will affect their lives. In this novel, Irving moves closer to addressing the question of free will, and of being able to change destiny, a question he will answer in his latest and last novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

Chapter 6

John Irving's latest novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, focuses on the lives of two young boys, Johnny Wheelright and Owen Meany, as they struggle to find meaning in their lives. In this work, Irving does not really abandon the presence of the controlling force in his previous novels, Fate. However, in Owen Meany, this force becomes God and thus is a more complex and more troubling presence in the characters' lives. As the boys and their families try to understand and cope with the chaotic and uncontrollable aspects of their lives, they must decide whether or not to have faith in God and in his ultimate plan. Those who do come to believe are not crippled by inaction, but are directed and soothed by their belief.

The choices that these characters must deal with are much more complex than those presented to Irving's previous characters. The troubling, sometimes tragic events which they must accept cause them to question their faith in a benevolent and caring God and sometimes in any God at all. Only Owen Meany, because of his perceived connection to God, ever truly puts aside all doubts and fully accepts that events which seem inexplicable really do have meaning.

In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Irving does not suggest that our society embrace organized religion or that we blindly accept the teachings of any one church. Sean French defends Irving's examination of the complex problems of believing in and accepting a higher being's control of our lives. He suggests that

> Irving is not calling for a religious revival but, rather, questioning our ability to respond to what we experience. America in this novel is a country of increasingly passive witnesses, where people watch Vietnam and the Irangate hearings on T.V. and simply get bored.[48]

What Irving does present is the lack of faith in anything which now characterizes our society. He advocates faith only in something greater than ourselves, in a God who infuses our lives with meaning and with

purpose. The events which affect the lives of Owen Meany and those close to him force them to confront the randomness in their lives; these characters must come to believe in God and in his plan in their own ways if they are to find meaning in their lives.

The ideas which Irving presents in this work concerning faith and God clearly emerged from his earlier ideas about Fate. This force has not disappeared; it has simply evolved and only by embracing a belief in it can the characters become fulfilled. William Pritchard misses Irving's underlying ideas about faith, stating that, "as for the novel's religious message, it doesn't have one except that you'd better believe that this wonderful little Owen guy was indeed the instrument of God, since our narrator does."[49] The only "religious message" Irving is giving is that in the lives of these characters, God is a very strong presence; how they deal with that presence will decide the courses of their lives.

The violence which pervades each of Irving's novels is less present in *Owen Meany*, yet it affects the characters' lives in a more direct way than ever before. The violent deaths of first Tabby Wheelright and later Owen himself are seen to be direct manifestations of God's plan. Owen prophesies the date and some of the circumstances of his own death years before it occurs. He is convinced, as other characters will eventually become, that these things are revealed to him by God, to help him to carry out God's plan. Although it is true "that Owen's faith is mixed with good measures of irony, sadness and even fatalism doesn't prevent it from being... the real article."[50]

However, Owen does not claim to understand all of the details of God's plan nor why he has been chosen. He simply states that "I am God's instrument; I have faith that God will let me know what I'm supposed to do, and when I'm supposed to do it" (*Prayer*, 326). This strong, unshakable faith can be misinterpreted. One critic feels that,

> to believe that everything is in God's hands hardly entitles anyone to believe that everything is determined in advance and that he

> knows exactly what will happen. This... denies the principle of free will.[51]

Owen chooses to believe in the signs which God has shown him. His faith gives his life a clear and strong purpose which is lacking in the lives of those in the novel with no faith. He believes that he has been shown his destiny by God so that he will be able to fulfil it. His faith not only gives him purpose, but also frees him from the ignorant, unstable life of his parents.

The first character whose life is by shaped her reactions to the violent events in her life is Hester Eastman. Hester, the first cousin of Johnny Wheelright, has to deal with the question of faith initially when she becomes romantically involved with Owen Meany. Hester's entire adult life is shaped by her love for Owen Meany and his belief in God and in God's plan for his life. As she becomes aware of Owen's beliefs, Hester tries to deny the control which God has over her life with Owen. When he tries to discuss with her and Johnny his conviction that God has chosen him for a specific fate, she "ran out of the kitchen and shut herself in the bathroom; she started running the water in the bathtub. 'I'm not listening to this shit, Owen--not one more time, I told you!' she cried" (*Prayer*, 421). And later, during that same discussion, Hester tries violently to beat Owen's beliefs out of him in an attempt to take control of their lives:

> She snapped the towel very close to Owen Meany's face, but Owen didn't move. "That's it, isn't it? You asshole!" she yelled at him. She snapped the towel again--then she unrolled it and ran at him, wrapping the towel around his head. "You think *God* wants you to go to Vietnam--don't you?" she screamed at him. She wrestled him out of his chair--she held his head in the towel in a headlock and she lay on her side across his chest, pinning him to the kitchen floor, while she began to pound him in the face with the fist of her free hand. (*Prayer*, 421)

Although at this point Hester recognizes that God controls the path of her life because of Owen's convictions, she does not believe that those convictions are valid. Hester sees that God controls her life because of

Owen's belief, but she does not believe in God's plan. She is desperately trying to deny that Owen will die when he believes he will.

Although Hester never comes to believe in God and his plan, she cannot escape the strong and unchangeable effect which Owen's beliefs and the final proof of these beliefs have on her life. Hester uses her feelings of helplessness and outrage at Owen's death and channels them into a successful musical career which reveals her emptiness and lack of faith in anything. Her despair is obvious in her rock videos:

> a mystifying blend of contemporary, carnal encounters with unidentified young boys undercut with black-and-white, documentary footage from the Vietnam War. Napalm victims, mothers cradling their murdered children, helicopters landing and taking off and crashing in the midst of perilous ground fire, emergency surgeries in the field, countless GI's with their heads in their hands--and Hester herself, entering and leaving different but similar hotel rooms, wherein a sheepish young boy is always just putting on or just taking off his clothes. (*Prayer*, 453)

Owen's death, which couldn't be prevented even by his own prior knowledge of it because he believed it was God's destiny for him, deprived Hester of the only man she will ever love and of the only meaning she will ever find in life.

Another character whose faith and whose life are profoundly affected by the disrupting and sad events in his life is Rev. Lewis Merrill. Although Rev. Merrill does eventually come to believe in God and in miracles, it is not because of the actual miracle of Owen's death, but because of his biological son's anger at Merrill's disbelief and his lack of faith. Almost from his introduction in the novel, Rev. Merrill "preached his doubt-is-the-essence-of-and-not-the-opposite-of-faith philosophy" (*Prayer*, 276). It becomes clear in his lectures to the students at Gravesend Academy that his doubt often and quite easily overwhelms his faith. As these lectures are the only satisfying part of his life, Rev. Merrill finds his faith difficult to maintain. Rev. Merrill's "family labored under a plainness so virulent that the dullness of his wife and children outshone even their proneness to

illness, which was remarkable" (*Prayer*, 109). Despite his chosen career, the significant aspects of Lewis Merrill's life have shown him that faith does not shield one from sadness and tragedy and he has a difficult time believing in a God whose will appears to be so random.

Rev. Merrill's already challenged belief in God is shattered by an event which he cannot reconcile with the idea of a merciful and forgiving God. The death of Tabitha Wheelright, the woman with whom he had had a secret, illegitimate child years before and to whom he was still attracted despite his own sacred marriage vows destroys Merrill's faith in a benevolent God. His wish that she die only seconds before she is killed by a stray baseball convinces Merrill that if there is a God, he is toying with humanity and there is no meaning in anything that happens. When Tabby's son, Johnny, finally discovers who his father is, Merrill admits his lost faith:

> The Rev. Mr. Merrill confessed that he had no faith at all; he had lost his faith, he told me, when my mother died. God had stopped speaking to him then; and the Rev. Mr. Merrill had stopped asking to be spoken to. (*Prayer*, 481)

For twenty years, Merrill preaches words he does not believe, witnesses miracles he cannot see and finds no true proof that God exists and that He has a plan for humanity.

The lost faith of Rev. Lewis Merrill is finally restored by the faith of his son who "creates" a miracle to show his father what he has only recently discovered: that everything happens for a reason and that only God can truly know those reasons. Johnny is angered by his father's ability to ignore the miracle of Owen Meany's death and decides to restore his father's faith with the very person whose death originally destroyed it. Johnny "fools" Merrill with Tabitha's exact replica: her dressmaking dummy, saved since her death by Owen who recognized that everything had a purpose. Johnny interrupts Merrill's preparation for Owen's funeral with a visitation he cannot ignore:

> from the door of the vestry, my mother's figure was both vividly alive and ghostly; "The Lady in Red" looked ready to sing. The

> effect of the blinking yellow light at the corner of Tan Lane and Front Street was also enhancing. (*Prayer*, 489)

When Merrill looks out at this spectacle, he believes that he is seeing Tabby and begs her forgiveness. His restored faith is evident at the funeral the following day:

> "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord..." my father began. There was something newly powerful and confident in his voice, and the mourners heard it; the congregation gave him their complete attention. Of course, I knew what it was that had changed in him; he had found his lost faith - he spoke with absolute belief in every word he uttered; therefore, he never stuttered. (*Prayer*, 497)

Merrill's life is irreversibly transformed because his son finally discovers him; despite his own denial of true miracles he has witnessed, he regains his faith because of these shocking events.

Johnny Wheelright's own life is transformed because of his friendship with Owen Meany and the undeniable evidence he witnesses of God's presence in his life. Johnny's life is relatively free from conflicts about faith, even after the death of his mother, until he becomes a teenager and starts to discover Owen's beliefs. Johnny is then forced to deal with the question of meaning and purpose in every area of his life.

The first time Johnny starts to question his life and the death of his mother is when he and Owen are nineteen. Owen, after many years, finally reveals to Johnny that he feels that his "accidental" killing of Johnny's mother was not accidental at all. As young boys, the two had been on a little league team together and the only strong hit Owen had ever made had struck Tabitha Wheelright in the temple and killed her. Johnny does not even think about the implications of this until Owen tells him, "God has taken your mother... my hands were the instrument, he said. "God has taken my hands. I am God's instrument."(*Prayer*, 301) This is just the first of many events which Owen believes are preordained in his life and which Johnny discounts throughout the years before Owen's death.

One event in Johnny's life, more than any that come after it, makes him believe in God and in God's power to direct the events of his own life. After years of hearing fragments of Owen's visions about his own future, Johnny witnesses these predictions come true and believes he has seen a miracle. After the funeral, Johnny reads Owen's journal in which these visions are plainly written in great detail, and Johnny can no longer deny the validity of Owen's beliefs. Johnny tells Rev. Merrill,

> but it is a miracle...he told you that dream--I know he did! And you were there--when he saw his name, and the date of his death, on Scrooge's grave. You were *there*! How can you doubt that he knew? He *knew--he knew everything*! What do you call that--if you don't call it a miracle? (*Prayer*, 463)

The death of Owen Meany proves the existence of God to Johnny and forever changes the course of his life.

Johnny's faith does not remain so strong without the presence of future miracles, though he never completely loses his belief in God. Although the miracle of Owen's death initially gives John his faith, it also damages him and causes him to feel great pain for many years. He feels he must leave his country and moves to Toronto, living a solitary life devoted to teaching and to the church. While reflecting on Owen's death and its consequences, he states,

> I wish someone could trick me the way I tricked him into having such absolute and unshakable faith. For although I believe I know what the *real* miracles are, my belief in God disturbs me and unsettles me much more than *not* believing ever did; unbelief seems vastly harder to me now than belief does - but belief poses so many unanswerable questions! (*Prayer*, 504)

John spends the rest of his life contemplating the miracle he witnessed and wishing that God would give Owen Meany back to him.

The final character in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* whose life is shaped around the events which prove to him the existence of God and of an ultimate plan is Owen Meany himself. The changes in Owen's life begin

at age ten or eleven, earlier than with most of Irving's characters. Owen is forced to deal with his own part in the death of his best friend's mother, a woman he cherishes. At around the same time, he is told by his parents that he was born of a virgin birth. Mr. Meany, his father, later relays an account of this to Owen's best friend, Johnny, stating, "I mean he was born unnaturally... like the Christ Child - that's what I mean... me and his mother, we didn't ever *do* it" (*Prayer*, 473). The combination of these two events convinces Owen that he is "God's instrument" and that God has a plan for his life. These initial events in Owen's life have such a profound effect that he starts to interpret everything that happens to him as part of God's plan for him.

Soon after, Owen has a vision of his own grave which he believes was sent by God to show him the date of his own death. While playing the Ghost of the Future in *A Christmas Carol* at his church, Owen sees his own name along with a date on the grave of Scrooge. He tells Johnny about it after: "'it wasn't *just* my name,' Owen said. 'I mean, not the way I *ever* write it--not the way I wrote it in the baby powder. It was my *real* name--it said the whole thing,' he said" (*Prayer*, 229). From then on, Owen believes that he will die on the date he saw, and that God has shown him so that he will be pr[illegible]ed for what he must do. He begins to shape his life around this belief in anticipation of fulfilling his part in God's plan.

Owen's belief in God and in the purpose of his life is cemented when, as a teenager, he has a dream of how he will die. He continues to have this dream until he dies. His diary reports his feelings about the dream:

> Last night I had a dream. Now I know four things. I know that my voice doesn't change - but I still don't know why. I know that I am God's instrument. I know when I'm going to die - and now a dream has shown me *how* I'm going to die. I'm going to be a *hero*! I trust that God will help me, because what I'm supposed to do looks very hard. (*Prayer*, 368-69)

Owen continues to have this dream throughout his high school years and eventually discusses it with two clergymen to help him understand it.

Despite their assurances that it is only a dream, Owen believes that the dream was sent by God to prepare him for what he will have to do. He begins to find ways to shape his future plans around the things revealed in the dream.

Owen's plans come to involve finding a means to get to Vietnam, where he thinks he will fulfil God's plan for him. During the early stages of the Vietnam war, he joins the ROTC in university, receiving a scholarship in return for serving in the army upon graduation. When his friends voice concerns about the intelligence of this plan, he states that,

> "I know that I *do* go," he said. "It's not necessarily a matter of *wanting* to... I don't *want* to be a hero," said Owen Meany. "It's not that I *want* to be--it's that I *am* a hero. I know that's what I'm *supposed* to be." (*Prayer*, 416, 417)

Owen does not believe that he can avoid his fate as a hero, so he embraces it and tries to work towards it as a goal. He believes that he *must* fulfil the fate revealed in his dream.

However, Owen's faith in this plan is not absolute and, as the time for his death approaches, he has some doubts as to the validity of his visions and beliefs. As he flies to Arizona, not Vietnam, on the day he believes he will die, he writes in his diary:

> "There's so much I know," he wrote, "but I don't know everything. Only God knows everything. There isn't time for me to get to Vietnam. I thought I knew I was going there. I thought I knew the date, too. But if I'm right about the date, then I'm wrong about it happening in Vietnam. And if I'm right about Vietnam, then I'm wrong about the date. It's possible that it really is 'just a dream'--but it seems so real! The *date* looked the most real, but I don't know--I don't know anymore." (*Prayer*, 515)

Even though Owen has believed his dream for many years, the doubts he feels cause him to question his convictions about God and even momentarily believe that he does not have to die. The strength of his beliefs does not keep doubt from his mind as he faces his death.

Owen's beliefs are finally made real to him as he recognizes the place where he will die and how he will become a hero. He prepares by getting into position and saves a group of Vietnamese children as he always believed he would. He dies knowing "that there was a purpose to everything that happened to him - that God meant for the story of his life to have some meaning" (*Prayer*, 477). His life was shaped by this belief and he died feeling that his life had meant something because of this belief.

The lives of the characters in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* who are faced with evidence of God's controlling presence are molded by this evidence, whether or not they choose to believe that it is real. They cannot escape the fates that these events condemn them to, even if they deny that these events are part of any divine plan. Those who do accept God's part in their lives must cope with the loss of control this entails and the many questions it raises. Owen Meany does this better than any other of Irving's characters. He remains active in his life, while accepting that he cannot change what he is meant to do.

Conclusion

In each of his seven novels to date, John Irving explores the basic human struggle to control our lives, to learn to accept the consequences of our decisions, and to accept the intervention of a greater, universal force. This search for order leads many of Irving's major characters to a life structured around his own brand of Stoicism. Irving, through the lives of his characters, shows that this Stoic approach to life is the only way to obtain happiness and fulfilment.

Although Irving does not engage in a written discussion of the importance of adopting a Stoic approach to life, he does develop characters who turn to this way of life--after desperately trying to find happiness in other ways, and failing. Each character must learn to accept his fate and to understand that "what befalls each man has been ordained in some way as conducive to his destiny."[52] Even pain and death have meaning, although that meaning may not be clear to the character affected. Yet this Stoic approach does not advocate that the characters become inactive; Irving's characters must continue to make decisions and to participate in all aspects of their lives.

Irving does not suggest in any of his novels that this Stoic approach to life is easy to achieve or maintain in the face of death and pain. But he does show that the difficult journey towards an acceptance of Fate or God is a small sacrifice when compared to the fulfilment and joy which result. In the world according to John Irving, the only way to find happiness is to embrace a belief in a greater force and to trust that every part of life has meaning and purpose.

Irving's approach to writing and to life make him difficult to place among his contemporaries in American literature. In numerous interviews, Irving has identified his own writing with an earlier age, claiming as one of his strongest influences the writings of Charles Dickens. Like Dickens, Irving's novels all centre around the lives of his characters and the way that they both are affected by and affect the world around them. His work

is accessible to relatively unsophisticated readers, but also offers much that has been studied and admired critically. Irving has stated in many interviews over the past ten years that his goal has been to take difficult ideas and make them easier and more accessible to the average reader. He does not believe that literature, or any form of artistic expression for that matter, should be aimed at an exclusive, highly literate audience. And in his attempt to make his writing accessible to everyone, he never compromises his personal vision. He manages, successfully, to integrate complex ideas and themes with interesting characters and storylines.

However, this emphasis on accessibility certainly does separate Irving's writing from that of other American writers such as William H. Gass. While Gass explores the problems of style, Irving tries to keep his structure as uncomplicated as possible in order to explore more fully his ideas about life. Gass explores the boundaries separating and connecting art and life. He is exceptionally successful in this exploration, but his work is difficult and thus not accessible to a mainstream audience. Conversely, Irving's novels, although dense with thematic exploration, are highly readable and thus appeal to a much wider audience.

Irving is also very different from American writers such as John Barth who explore the nature of fiction and language. Not only does Irving focus on what writing can illuminate about life instead of about writing; he also has a much more positive view of the place of fiction in American society. Irving's novels attempt to show how one can make the struggle not only to survive life, but also to enjoy life, less difficult and less personally destructive.

Yet Irving's writing is not entirely different from all of his contemporaries. Throughout his novels, Irving explores the force(s) which control the universe and the way these forces influence the destinies of his characters. Thomas Pynchon also explores these themes--although with very different results--and, like Irving, appeals to a wide variety of readers. Irving's style is certainly not as experimental as that of Pynchon's as Irving prefers linear plot lines and does not utilize complex scientific metaphors.

However, there is definitely a link between these two writers in the way that both are concerned with the emptiness and isolation which threatens contemporary American life.

Even closer comparisons may be seen between Irving's writing and that of Thomas Berger and Joseph Heller. Like Berger, Irving explores the diverse situations into which contemporary Americans are continually thrust, and which demand honesty and perseverance to survive. Both writers have been somewhat ignored critically, possibly because their novels are difficult to categorize. And both are concerned with how people come to know and understand the world around them, as well as with the search for meaning in what often appears to be a meaningless world. Homer Wells must chose between a life which offers the illusion of security and happiness for one which offers personal fulfillment and self exploration; Walter Hunsicker in *Changing the Past* must choose between a life created by his imagination, full of wealth and power, and the "real" life of both wonder and tragedy into which he was born.[53]

Like Joseph Heller, Irving is concerned with exploring those components of modern life which seem to be contradictory, or even absurd. In *Catch 22*, Heller exposes the procedures of wartime to be even less logical than the unspoken rules of a playground of children.[54] Irving similarly shows that the "cider house rules" which one must follow in life are different for everyone and cannot be counted on as a guide to a successful life. Yet, Heller sees much less hope in finding a way to obey the rules of the world without compromising personal integrity than Irving who shows in his novels that fulfillment is possible despite the absurdity of life.Irving is also not as preoccupied with constructing complex narrative frameworks as Heller and thus the world he depicts seem much less chaotic and threatening, much less a place to escape.

Overall, the writing of John Irving is more optimistic than that of most of his contemporaries. He does recognize the dark, seemingly overwhelming elements of life, but he offers a way to confront and come to accept those elements. Like Toni Morrison, he acknowledges that violence and

pain are inescapable but that love and beauty still make life worth living. Irving also sees more potential for happiness in the world than do writers like Joyce Carol Oates; unlike Oates, Irving does not believe that loneliness or death will triumph in the ultimate plan for the universe.

John Irving's writing, as a whole, must be taken as "a sign of life, not a sign of death."[55] Irving explores, as do many of his contemporaries, the problems of survival in a world full of unexplained violence and death; but in the process Irving affirms the existence of something deeper: a sense of purpose and meaning that he believes makes life, without exception, worthwhile. This is the message John Irving's novels convey in their compelling as well as entertaining manner. And in this lies Irving's greatest achievement: his proven ability to take "very complicated things and make them accessible"[56] to everyone.

Notes

[1]Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson, *John Irving* (Boston: Twayne, 1986) 7.

[2]Nancy Walker, "John Irving," *Critical Survey of Long Fiction*, ed. Frank N. Magill, 4 vols. (LaCanada, California: Salem Press Inc., 1983) 4: 1415, 1416.

[3]Harter and Thompson, 11.

[4]Michael Priestly, "Structure in the Worlds of John Irving," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 23.1 (1981): 82.

[5]C. R. Haines, "Stoicism," *The Communings with Himself of Marcus Aurelius Antonimus, Emperor of Rome, together with his Speeches and Sayings*, ed. and trans. C. R. Haines (1916; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1970) xxii.

[6]J. O.Urmson and Jonathan Rée, eds., *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers: New edition, completely revised* (1960; London: Unwin Hyman, 1991) 306.

[7]Marcus Aurelius, *The Communings of Himself of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Emperor of Rome, Together with his Speeches and Sayings*, ed. and trans. C. R. Haines (1916; London: Heinemann Ltd., 1970) 131.

[8]John Irving, *The World According to Garp* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976). [All further references to this work will be indicated with *Garp* and page number in parenthetical documentation.]

[9]John Irving, *The Cider House Rules* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985). [All further references to this work will be indicated with *Cider* and page number in parenthetical documentation.]

[10]John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys Publishers, 1989). [All further references to this work will be indicated with *Prayer* and page number in parenthetical documentation.]

[11]"Fate," *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 1983 ed.

[12]John Irving, *Setting Free the Bears* (New York: Pocket Books, 1968). [All further references to this work will be indicated with *SFB* and page number in parenthetical documentation.]

[13]John Irving, *The Water-Method Man* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972). [All further references to this work will be indicated with *WMM* and page number in parenthetical documentation.]

[14]John Irving, *The 158-Pound Marriage* (New York: Pocket Books, 1973). [All further references to this work will be indicated with *158-P* and page number in parenthetical documentation.]

[15]Edward C. Reilly, "The Anschluss and the World According to Irving," *Research Studies* 51.2 (1983): 98.

[16]John Irving, *The Hotel New Hampshire* (New York: Pocket Books, 1981). [All further references to this work will be indicated with *Hotel* and page number in parenthetical documentation.]

[17]Epictetus, *Moral Discourses: Enchiridion and Fragments*, trans. Elizabeth Carter (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1955) 49.

[18]Urmson and Rée, 92.

[19]Jane Bowers Hill, "John Irving's Aesthetics of Accessibility: Setting Free the Novel. *South Carolina Review* 16.1 (1983): 41.

[20]Greil Marcus, "John Irving: *The World of The World According to Garp*." *Rolling Stone* 13 December 1979: 72.

[21]Marcus, "The World," 68.

[22]Harter and Thompson, 34.

[23]Gabriel Miller, *John Irving* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1982) 28.

[24]Miller, 33.

[25]Miller, 54.

[26]Harter and Thompson, 54.

[27]Harter and Thompson, 67.

[28]"Transcend," *The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language: Canadian Edition*, 198

[29]Marcus Aurelius, 83.

[30]Miller, 83.

[31]Priestly, 85.

[32]William Nelson, "Unlikely Heroes: The Central Figures in *The World According to Garp*, *Even Cow Girls Get the Blues*, and *A Confederacy of Dunces*," *The Hero in Transition*, eds. Ray B. Brown and W. Marshall (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular, 1983) 169.

[33]Miller, 114.

[34]Marcus, 72.

[35]Walker, 1416.

[36]Walker, 1425.

[37]Miller, 130.

[38]Miller, 129.

[39]Reilly, 108.

[40]Edward C. Reilly, "John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire* and the Allegory of Sorrow." *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association* 9.1 (1983): 82.

[41]John Irving, "The Narrative Voice," *Voicelust: Eight Contemporary Fiction Writers on Style*, ed. and intro. by Allen Wier and Don Hendrie (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) 92.

[42]Haines, xxv.

[43]Harter and Thompson, 143.

[44]Benjamin DeMott, "Guilt and Compassion," *The New York Times Book Review* 26 May 1985: 1.

[45]Paul Gray, "An Orphan or an Abortion," *Time* 3 June 1985: 81.

[46]Gray, 81.

[47]Harter and Thompson, 129.

[48]Sean French, "Pleasure of Plot," *New Statesman and Society* 12 May 1989: 35

[49]William H. Pritchard, "Small Town Saint," *The New Republic* 22 May 1989: 38.

[50]David Mutch, "Faith and Friendship," *Christian Science Monitor* 19 April 1989: 13.

[51]Alfred Kazin, "God's Own Little Squirt," *The New York Times Book Review* 12 March 1989: 30.

[52]Marcus Aurelius, 107.

[53]Thomas Berger, *Changing the Past* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989).

[54]Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1961).

[55]Michael Priestly, "An Interview with John Irving," *New England Review* 1 (1980): 498

[56]Priestly, 498.

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